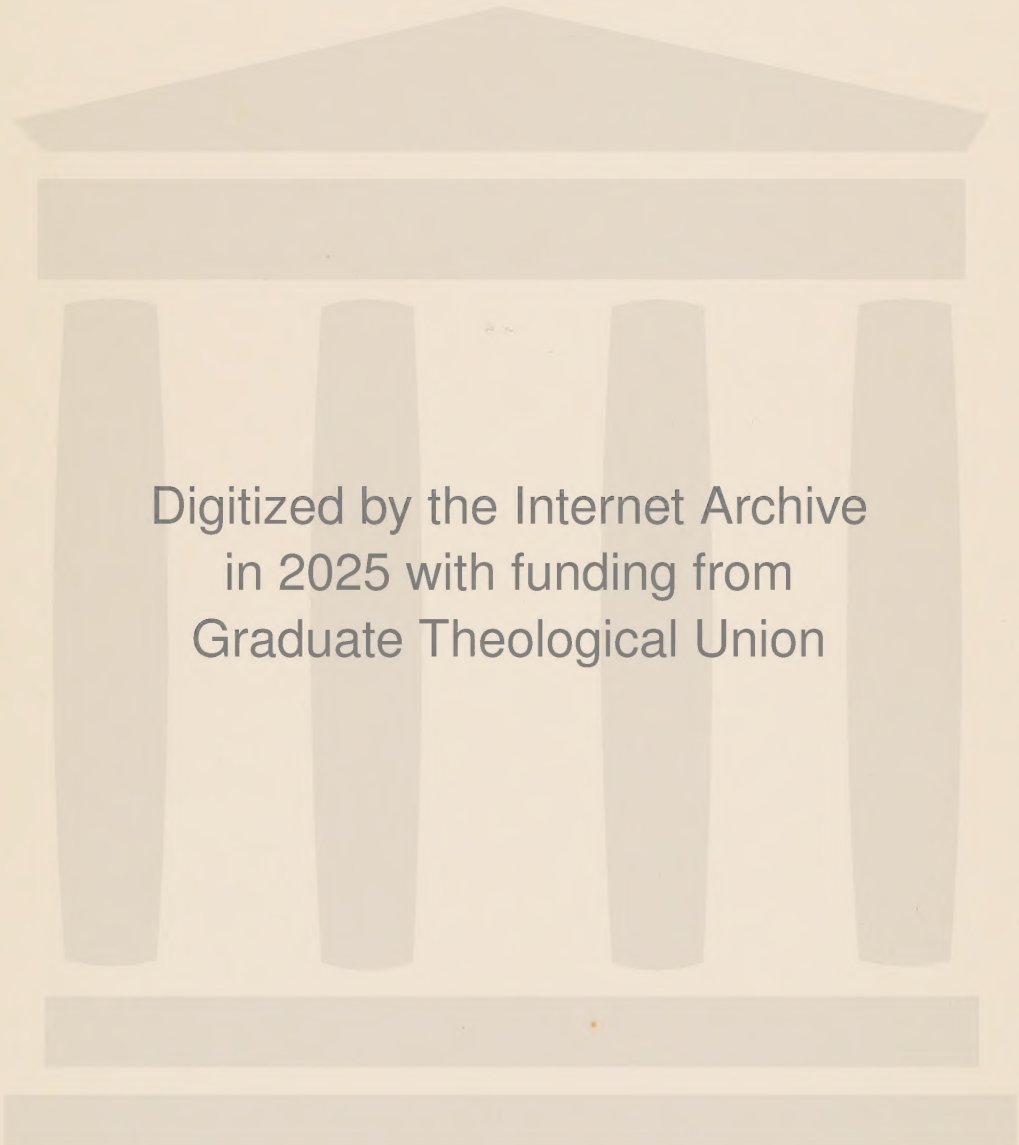
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ETHICAL CONCEPTS OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

With Special Reference to the Problems of the Seven Churches

A Thesis

submitted in candidacy for the degree of

Doctor of Theology

in the

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by

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Department of
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INTRODUCTION

There has been no dearth of comment upon the book which closes the canon of the New Testament, the Apocalypse of John. Because of its striking characteristics, so different from the other books of the New Testament, it has always attracted attention, and challenged interpreters to unravel its mysteries. The majority of writers have dealt mainly with those features of the work which mark it as distinct in form from other New Testament literature: the lurid symbolism, the strange visions, the odd figures with which its pages are filled. Many are the blue prints of future events which have been constructed by a literal interpretation of the figurative language of the book, and many are the persons who think of the Apocalypse largely as a manual of eschatological wonders.

Of sober comment upon the Apocalypse there has been a large amount. The names of Charles, Swete, C. A. A. Scott, Simcox, Ramsay, Trench, Bousset, are familiar to every Bible student, and they represent but a small number of those scholars who have sought to describe and interpret the Apocalypse in terms which their generations would find intelligible. Their work includes general surveys and commentaries as well as discussions of special phases of the message and nature of the book.

But when one seeks for a discussion of the ethics of this work, in terms of historical and social situations and the reaction of Christians to them, it is difficult to find the material gathered in any one place. There are no detailed discussions of ethical matters in the introductions to the standard commentaries, though in the commentaries themselves matters which have ethical bearing are discussed, <u>in loco</u>. Nor are any specialized works to be found on the ethics of the Apocalypse, such as are to be found in the literature which deals with Jesus, and Paul, and the New Testament in general.

Indeed, when this writer proposed to investigate the Apocalypse to discover what, if anything, it had to say with respect to ethics, there was doubt expressed by a number of Christian leaders as to whether anything significant would be found.

The little book by Raymond Calkins, entitled "The Social Message of the Book of Revelation", was the one manual in which the distinctively social, and hence ethical, quality of the Apocalypse was held clearly in view throughout.

It is the writer's opinion that this situation has severly damaged the testimony of this New Testament Apocalypse. Without question, the great majority of laymen, and a far too large percentage of ministers hold views of the nature and message of the Apocalypse which are demonstrably partial and faulty, if not actually false to the spirit of the book. One of the reasons for this situation is that the book is not studied in the light of the conditions which obtained in the province of Asia, to which the Apocalypse was written in the closing days of the first Christian century. It is very often assumed that the only true meaning which the Apocalypse has is a meaning for a generation, presumably this one, which stands at the end of time, when conditions are finally prepared for the break-through of God into history in the Messianic Age. It is not the purpose of this inquiry to dissuss methods of interpretation of the book. Our attention is focussed sharply upon the circumstances which called forth the writing, upon the milieu of the seven churches of Asia to which John the Seer addresses himself in the Apocalypse.

Investigation has validated the premise that the Apocalypse was brought forth to meet certain measurable and identifiable conditions, social in nature, which posed difficult questions of conduct for Christians. These

questions, the Apocalyptist was attempting to help the Asian Christians answer.

In the course of the study a curious and valuable fact has appeared, viz. that the problems which were part of the environment of the first century Christians of the province of Asia were not confined to that time and place, but can, with a minimum of change, be discovered within our own society. Another discussion of great interest and value might be entered into to trace the similarities and points of contact between these two far-flung ages, but, with very minor exceptions, the writer has refrained from drawing such parallels in this paper.

Upon even a cursory inspection of the Apocalypse it becomes apparent that there is a different atmosphere in it after the third chapter. Up to that point the writing has been substantially understandable without reference to esoteric symbolism. Though elements of symbolism have not been lacking, the work is straightforwardly addressed by one John, an exile upon the isle of Patmos, to seven churches of the province of Asia, to describe to them certain visions which have been granted to him. These visions have real significance for the churches, in view of their situations and actions. Each church is addressed in pointed and specific terms which clearly mirror its condition, and the Apocalyptist proceeds to make a judgment of the church in terms of its response to those conditions.

But at the beginning of the fourth chapter of the Apocalypse, there is a shift of scene, so to speak, from earth to heaven. The remainder of the book consists of a series of visions which were granted to the Seer, and which show the ultimate fate of the world through all of its tortuous way until it be redeemed by God and Christ. In consequence of this shift in emphasis there is an absence throughout the book from chapter four onward of any considerable statement of the actual human scene, such as informs the

first three chapters. Thus, in this study, most careful attention had to be paid to those three chapters, and particularly to the second and third, in which the seven churches are directly and specifically addressed.

The plan of the paper, briefly, is this. An introductory chapter seeks to deal with preliminary matters, such as the nature of apocalyptic literature in general, the place of this Apocalypse of John within the general framework, the development of emperor-worship within the Roman Empire, and a summary of the Apocalypse. This chapter is followed by another which examines the prologue of the Apocalypse (chapter one of the book) so that the following two chapters may more readily be understood. Chapter three, which forms the bulk of the discussion, treats of the Letters to the Seven Churches (Revelation two and three). Following a survey of questions which arise about the letters generally, each letter is examined carefully and in detail, in order that the nature of the church addressed and the city in which the church was located may be clearly seen. The next chapter attempts to gather up the various ethical problems which were discovered in the seven letters, and to weave them into a pattern. The general problems of the churches are indicated, as well as the various ways in which the churches dealt with the problems. A concluding chapter seeks to set forth the philosophy of the problem of good and evil which was held by the author of the Apocalypse, which is of the greatest moment in an ethical discussion. This chapter is an analysis of certain of the later chapters of the book which set forth the Seer's philosophy of good and evil and of certain isolated passages which are relevant to the discussion.

The Biblical text employed throughout is that of the American Standard Version, published by Thomas Nelson and Sons, under copyright of 1901. In addition to this text there has been appended, at the appropriate place,

the text of the first, and the second and third chapters of the Apocalypse in the translation of Father Ronald Knox. This is a translation of remarkable beauty and force by an eminent Roman Catholic scholar, and is introduced for purposes of comparison with the more familiar American Standard text. The Greek text used for quotation has been that of Nestle.

The method of procedure has been a careful study of the text of the Apocalypse first in the Greek, and then in several English translations. Throughout this study material of ethical import and bearing was collated. Then the various commentaries, as listed in the bibliography, were consulted, compared, contrasted and evaluated. Following another study of the text, the material was assembled and put into form. Every effort has been made to avoid extreme views of every sort, and to set forth interpretations which have solid weight of scholarship behind them. But most important of all, matters of fact have been set forth, in the hope that fact might dispel fiction in a vital area of New Testament interpretation.

SUMMARY

The Revelation of John is an important example of a literary form known as Apocalypse, i.e., the revelation of hidden things. This literary genre flourished during the two or three centuries immediately surrounding the time of Christ. The most obviously familiar feature of Apocalyptic literature is its regular use of extremely pictorial language to clothe, and to cloak, its thought, so that only those who understand the symbolism can pierce the "mystery" of the writing.

Apocalyptic literature was constructed in this veiled way because its content was almost entirely subversive of the interests of political overlords. Out of oppression, from the days of Antiochus Epiphanes to the reign of Domitian and beyond, this literature was born. Its purpose was to nerve the Jews or Christians to withstand the blasphemous demands of the ruling tyrants. The blasphemy was centered in a demand by the overlords to be given the worship and dignity which is due only to God.

Such a demand was so abhorrent to the monotheistic Jews and Christians that they resisted intransigently every attempt to enforce worship of the king or emperor. One of the main interests, perhaps the central interest, of the book of Revelation, is to nerve the Christians of Asia to resist the blandishments and pressures brought to bear upon them by the priests of an emperor-worshipping cult. This cult was strongly based in Asia and seriously affected the churches of that province.

John the Apocalyptist addresses his book to seven of the churches of Asia, employing the seven as representative of the whole company of Christians. This device allows him to consider the groups both as the

churches and the Church. In the Seven Letters, contained in chapters two and three, he analyzes the situations of the seven churches in order, dwelling upon their virtues and vices, enjoining repentance or continued faithfulness and promising rewards which are consonant with the type of conduct displayed by the churches.

In the course of this discussion the major and typical problems which faced first century Christians are clearly pointed out. Basically they reduce to two: (1) the ubiquitous cult of the emperor, which was increasingly aggressive, and which demanded an allegiance to the emperor which Christians would give only to God; and (2) the insistent and subtle problem of how completely Christians could participate in the life of their pagan communities without compromising their consciences and losing their distinctive quality of character.

John gives straightforward answers to these problems. Christians must stand against any sort of false teaching, and must live lives of transparent purity, keeping the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. That such an attitude will bring persecution upon them should not deter them or weaken their testimony. Christians must bear a convincing and consistent witness to a pagan world. Persecution, suffering, and even death are to be part of the calculated risk.

According to John, it is a risk only from the temporal point of view. Evil is not the manifestation of a persistent and basic power. It is, rather, transient and evanescent. Already the forces of evil have been routed from heaven, and at the end of the present world-order, they will be routed, punished, and destroyed on earth. That outcome is as sure as the Word of God.

Therefore, let Christians hold fast to the principles of their faith.

Let their lives be pure and honorable and stedfast. Works of righteousness, indicating a righteous inner nature, will be rewarded with life and fellowship with God. Works of wickedness, manifesting an inner evil, will be reason for destruction.

In the face of whatever peril may come, Christians are enjoined by John to resist the twin sins of worshipping the emperor and participating licentiously in the life of their pagan communities.

CHAPTER ONE

THE NATURE OF THE APOCALYPSE OF JOHN

1. Swete, Henry B., "The Apocalypse of St. John", p. 1.

2. Revelation 1:1.

3. This will be the regular designation of the book throughout this discussion.

4. Revelation 1:4.

CHAPTER ONE

THE NATURE OF THE APOCALYPSE OF JOHN

With the first word of its Greek text, the book known to us as Revelation defines its nature. It is as an ἀποκάλυψις that we must deal with it. The word is rare in Greek literature outside the New Testament, but is used fairly often in the Scripture text. According to Swete,

> The Epistles use it eschatologically (1) in reference to the revelation of God (Rom. ii. 5), of Christ (I Cor. 1. 7, II Th. 1. 7, I Pet. i. 7, 13, iv. 13), and of the Saints (Rom. viii. 19), which is to be made at the Parousia; and also (2) of any revelation now made to the church (Rom. xvi. 25, I Cor. xiv. 6, 26, II Cor. xii. 1, 7, Gal. i. 12, ii. 2, Eph. iii. 3) through the Spirit as a πνεῦμα ἀποκαλύψεως (Eph. 1. 17).[1]

Ἀποκάλυψις may be interpreted as disclosure, revelation, manifestation, enlightenment, unveiling of things concealed. Its use in title and superscription at the beginning of this book clearly sets out what the book is meant to accomplish: the plain statement of things which must shortly come to pass.[2] That many later commentators upon the book have dealt with it in terms of mystery, and that to the majority of laymen it is indeed a book which communicates but little of the truth which it means to reveal to its readers, are facts to be deplored, and altered if it may be. To aid in some small fashion to bring its message to people who need to hear it is the purpose of this study. Surely a writing which describes itself as a revelation must reveal, and not conceal, the message which it bears.

The difficulties in interpreting the Apocalypse,[3] consist almost wholly in the fact that it is a representative of a type of literature which bears the name "Apocalyptic." This sort of writing seems rather weird and exotic to us of the western world and the twentieth century, but it was a perfectly natural and normal mode of expression in the world of the first Christian century, and in the province of Asia to which the Apocalypse is addressed.[4]

1. Porter, F. C., "Messages of the Apocalyptic Writers, pp. 7, 8.

Representatives of this class of writings were incorporated into the canon of the Old Testament, eg. Daniel, especially the last six chapters, large sections of Ezekiel and Isaiah, parts of Jeremiah, Joel, Zechariah, certain of the Psalms, etc. In the intertestamental period, Apocalyptic had flourished. The list of such writings, as given by Porter, is instructive:

1. Enoch
   a. Ethiopic Book of Enoch
      Ch. 1 - 36, 72 - 108, about 100 B. C. and later
      Ch. 37 - 71 "Similitudes", probably not long before Christ.
   b. Slavonic Secrets of Enoch. Before 70 A. D.
2. Assumption of Moses. 4 B. C. - 10 A. D.
3. Apocalypse of Ezra (2 Esdras 3 - 14). 90 - 100 A. D.
4. Apocalypse of Baruch. 90 - 100 A. D.
5. Apocalypse of Abraham. Perhaps first century A. D.
6. Testament of the Patriarchs. Probably first century A. D.[1]

In the main, Christian writers did not contribute to this literature. They seemed content to revise and interpret Jewish Apocalypses so that these gave support of ancient patriarchs and prophets to the new faith. The Apocalypse of Peter, the Shepherd of Hermas, some sections of a work known as the Ascension of Isaiah, 2 Esdras 1, 2, 15 - 16, and the Christian portions of the Sibylline Oracles, when they are added to our present book, complete the list of the Christian apocalypses. This last writing is, by all odds and virtually all opinions, the most significant of Christian apocalypses, and perhaps even the most important specimen of this literary genre to come down to us.

What is the nature of this type of literature, whence its origin, what the conventions of such composition which multiply difficulties for the modern interpreter? Before we can turn to a consideration of the book itself these questions must be dealt with.

1. "Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament"., Volume II, pp. vii-ix.

Speaking generally, apocalyptic literature was the child of prophecy. Not only do the apocalyptical books make much use of the prophetic books, but post-exilic prophecy, from the time of Ezekiel, makes much use of apocalyptical forms.[1] It is the view of Charles that apocalyptic is the continuance of the stream of prophecy in a time when Legalistic Judaism ruled supreme.

From the times of Ezra and Nehemiah an increasing stress and importance was placed upon the Law. Always it had been considered of first importance, but now its position was enhanced to the extent of having the practical effect of declaring a "closed vision". That is to say, the Law was considered a sufficient guide to the Jews in any situation of life which might arise. It contained the word of God to His people, and did not require any contemporary inspiration as voiced by a prophet to assist it in its task of enlightening the people. The result of this one-sided emphasis upon the Law served not only to discourage prophets and prophecy, which gradually withered away, but also to minimize the worth of the great tradition of the writing prophets of former days, which is one of the chief glories of the Old Testament.

There were some leading spirits in Israel to whom this neglect of the prophets seemed wrong, as did the insistence that no further prophecy was necessary. The state of Jewish fortunes, which were at low ebb, and the overlordship of foreign powers, who held ascendancy over the Promised Land for generations, were facts which cried aloud for explanation. What was God doing, that He should leave His own people in such straits? Was there to be a future for the Jews less fraught with oppression than their then present was? Had the Chosen People been cast aside? Were the pagans forever to be triumphant? These questions found no clear answer, or interpretation, in the Law as it was being expounded by the priests. Surely such questions must be answered.

Any adequate answer would be in some such terms as the ancient prophets were accustomed to speak: in positive, creative terms, as from the mouth of God himself. Anything short of that would be sheer temporizing. There was enough of the minute scrutiny of the Law and its interpretations, enough slavish following of the religious authorities already. A new note needed to be sounded, which would in effect revive the old spirit of prophecy.

The apocalyptists did not wish to minimize the importance of the Law. Their basic concern was to speak a word which was not being spoken about the nature of the world and of the God who made it, and about the ultimate fate of men and nations. However, though they had no wish to discredit the Law, the influence of the Law lay like a pall upon their efforts. In the minds of the Jews was the firmly planted idea that no further word of God was expected, or necessary. What effect, then could a word of prophecy have upon the people? Would not the overwhelming power of the Law simply engulf any new word? That was a danger, but the apocalyptic writers solved it partially by writing, not in their own names, but in the names of the great ones of the olden time. In this they differed tremendously from the prophets, those avowed and self-proclaimed "speakers for God." The prophets had boldly cast their message into the midst of whatever social and historical situation they were in, and their messages were daringly and disconcertingly personal and direct. What strikes us immediately as we read of the dealings of Isaiah and Jeremiah and the rest of the prophets with the kings and leaders of their day is the boldness with which they laid bare the evils of the time, with little thought of their own personal safety. Their authority was moral, and they declared themselves to be spokesmen for the God of Israel. So strong was the impression of moral authority which they conveyed that even the most extreme and distasteful messages rarely resulted in their becoming victims of violence.

In comparison with this forthrightness of the prophets, the pseudonymity of the Apocalyptists appears as a weak sort of accomodation device. Yet, in view of the strength and conservatism of the Legalists of the day, its wisdom is also plain. Only under the guise of a message from some great figure from the past: Enoch, or Moses, or Ezra, or Baruch, or Isaiah, or Abraham, could the message be apread abroad with any probability of success.

Pseudonymity had another stimulus. The Jewish nation was not free. In the period surrounding the beginning of the Christian era, the Romans had inherited it by conquest, the last of a long series of powerful overlords to hold dominion over it. The questions with which Apocalyptic dealt, queries about the ultimate position of the Jews and their rulers, were of the sort which would easily appear treasonous to the censors. The Romans took a severe view of any literature which would bolster the nerve and strengthen the resistance of the peoples under their control. Pseudonymity, along with the thoroughgoing symbolism of Apocalyptic which we will discuss below, served as a deterrent to the Romans' understanding of the nature of the work, or the identification of the author. A pseudonymous work, purporting to come from some long-dead hero, might be accepted by the conquerors as part of the folk-lore of the people, but would convey to the Jews themselves a clear awareness of its true nature as a tract for the times.

Of the usefulness of this device in a similar situation nearer to our own time, Charles Phillips, in his life of Paderewski, says, of a period in Polish history when that country was, as now, under the oppression of Russia,

> As a matter of fact the Poles had by this time developed in their writing an art of allegory, of veiled significance, which became the quintessence of symbolic double-meaning. It was their only safeguard against a censorship which threatened death not only to national authors

1. Wishart, Charles, "The Book of Day", p. 7.

> but even to readers found possessing national writings. "The possession of Mickiewicz's *Ancestors* sent a boy of seventeen to the dungeon, where, maddened with terror lest under the knout he should betray the names of his companions, he burnt himself to death. Hundreds of young men went to Siberia for having read Kransinski's *Temptations*." Thus Poland had her Mickiewicz whose poems, their real significance hidden, were passed by the Russian censors only because the censors did not penetrate to their true meaning. She had her exiled Slowacki, the mystic of Siberia, and she had her Anonymous Poet, Krasinski, the authorship of whose writings, smuggled into the country from Switzerland, remained concealed for thirty years. Later on she had her Sienkiewicz who dared to tell his people their story only in terms of romance of the past; in whose *Quo Vadis*, even, with its scenes of ancient Rome, the Poles read the interlinear record of their own struggle against Neronian tyranny. Poland has a vast library of *double entendre* literature grown out of oppression and proscription.[1]

The Apocalyptists of the Roman overlordship of the Jews used precisely the same means to prevent the Romans from obtaining insight into the true nature and meaning of their work. Accordingly, a highly complex and technical symbolism was evolved to describe the situation of the Jews and their adversaries. The literature literally teems with strange particolored and synthetic beasts, with "human" figures which display inhuman characteristics, with cabalistic numbers used in their symbolic sense, with strange concatenations of heavenly beings, with unnatural plagues, with obscene creatures from the lower depths, with shining and splendid visions of heaven and the Lord of life.

To one who had no interest in or knowledge of the Jews, this odd mumbo-jumbo conveyed nothing except perhaps a sort of surprise that anyone should write, let alone read, such nonsense. And even if suspicion should arise that there was a double meaning, it would have been a considerable task to decipher the meaning, and harder still to apprehend the pseudonymous author.

The Apocalyptists differ in other ways than by their pseudonymity from the prophets. The latter had been original in a thoroughgoing sense, the material of their prophecy arising out of some current situation and the prophet's reaction to it. The Apocalyptists avail themselves freely of material from without. Hence their messages are lacking in the passionate immediacy which mark the true prophetic writings. Earnest and vigorous as the apocalypses are, it is hard to read them without a feeling for their conscious construction from other sources.

This feeling persists in spite of the common declaration by the authors that they had been granted the boon of vision, and that their writing is but the transcription of what they beheld while in a visionary trance. For that declaration is demonstrably a literary device. In all apocalypses there can be traced influences which led directly from older writings and experiences to conceptions which the Apocalyptists themselves defined in terms of vision. Large use was made of the writings of the canonical prophets, and of the pagan mythologies, especially of Babylon and Persia, which had become familiar to the Jews during their days of exile, and which had left many of their prevalent ideas deeply rooted in Jewish thought and life. In the later days of apocalyptic writing usage was freely made of earlier apocalypses, and of apocalyptic elements in other works, so that gradually some of the symbols came to have an almost standard significance.

This was especially true of the numbers which were constantly in use. Numbers were a convenient way of symbolizing certain facts and concepts in the Jewish culture. We should have little difficulty in understanding this fact. In our land, the number thirteen is almost universally identified with sinister forces and "bad luck", while the number seven is expressive of good fortune and success. Among the Jews there was a rather

thorough-going use of numerical symbols that was very expressive to those who understood and equally confusing to those who did not. This was a boon to the Apocalyptists, who could employ the familiar shorthand of number symbolism with assurance that while the Jews would understand immediately the deeper meaning of the number, the Romans would not.

Because of the large part which number-symbols play in the Apocalypse of John, we shall pause to introduce some of the more important usages here. The unity of God, expressive of the strict monotheism of the Jews, was fittingly symbolized by the number one. The four corners of the earth, as demanded by the flat earth of Ptolemaic cosmology, and the four winds, lent their number to earth. Four became the number of the created world. Three was the symbol of the divine, perhaps because of the three-fold relation between father, mother, and child, in a human home, which early peoples recognized, as do we, to be the surest hint of heaven upon the earth. When the number of the divine, three, was added to the number of created things, four, the resultant seven became symbolic of perfection, or completeness. Six, which approached seven without quite attaining it, was the number of incompleteness or failure, and by implication, of sin. Ten, the double of five, was the number of human completeness, symbolizing the possession of all the fingers, or all the toes, perhaps, and reminiscent of the earliest days of the race, when an unmaimed man was probably a rarity. Twelve, through its reference to the twelve tribes of the Israelites, came to be thought of as a symbol of totality, a completion symbol of slightly different significance from the number ten.

Single numbers written side by side, or doubled, as eleven, or seventy-seven, or six hundred and sixty-six, intensified the original significance of the number, and halving diminished the force.

1. Revelation 2:1 - 3:22.

2. Revelation 6:1 - 8:5.

3. Revelation 8:6 - 11:19.

4. Revelation 15:1 - 16:21.

5. Revelation 5:6.

6. Revelation 1:12.

7. Revelation 12:1 - 14:20.

8. Revelation 10:3.

9. Revelation 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; 22:14.

In the Apocalypse of John, the number seven is the favorite symbol. Fifty-four times it occurs in the book. Thus there are seven letters to seven churches,[1] seven seals to be opened,[2] seven trumpets to be blown,[3] and seven bowls to be poured out,[4] because this number makes a complete series. In the vision of Christ portrayed in chapter five the Lamb has "seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God."[5] There are seven golden candlesticks,[6] seven mystic figures,[7] seven thunders,[8] seven beatitudes.[9]

From the foregoing paragraphs it will be seen that the Apocalyptists were men who used many sources in the construction of their "revelations", and that accordingly, interpretation of the revelation depended upon the possession of key knowledge and understanding. Unless one was, so to speak, an initiate, it would be difficult to interpret with any degree of certainty the figurative and symbolic language in which the message was couched. That was true even for the generation for which the books were written. Consider then how enormously more complicated becomes the problem of the modern interpreter. Not only must he penetrate the symbolism of the book and discover what it means, individually and collectively, but he must also make the symbolism, and that which was symbolized, intelligible to a modern audience. Fortunately the patient scholarship which is necessary to such a painstaking venture has produced, in some excellent English commentaries, the tools which the average reader needs to make the Apocalypse of John a real "revelation", and not merely an esoteric collection of visions.

What was the message which the Apocalyptists endeavored to bring to their people through the media of pseudonymous authorship and form of double intent? To a discouraged, defeated Jewish nation, living in servitude, and poverty, and hopelessness, what did they have to say?

1. John 11:50.

In so widespread a literature there are many differences of emphasis, but it is possible to discover some of the controlling conceptions of the Apocalyptists. God, they said, was the creator and moral governor of the world. Despite the triumphs of the pagans, in the face of the weak Jewish situation, these writers insisted upon the divine sovereignty. Because the God of their fathers was the God of the universe, because he had created it and was governing it, the Apocalyptists were positive that evil had, in the long run, no chance at all of survival. A time of judgment was sure to come, a judgment which would not be in terms of the power which men had, for that would appear meagre indeed before the power of the Almighty God, but in terms of the conduct of individual men in relation to the principles of mature, religious morality.

The role of the individual in life is here brought out in a new and dynamic fashion. From early Hebrew days, the society of the Israelites had been based upon the notion that the individual derived his importance and significance wholly from the group, that personality was corporate, and not individual. The individual was expected to fit into the group structure, since what was good for the whole was good equally for the members of the whole. This idea still maintained strength enough in the day of Jesus for the High Priest Caiaphas to propose that Jesus should be put to death because, "it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not."[1] This view soon had led to its corollary, that the fortunes of the nations affected decisively the fortunes of the individual. Thus, when Israel went into captivity, there was no effective resistance left in the people who had for so long considered that their significance derived from the group. What the exiles needed most was a faith in their own importance as people without reference to the fortunes of a

1. Ezekiel 18:4.

larger unit of society. The great prophet-priest of the exile, Ezekiel, was the first to propose that the individual was of supreme importance in his own right, and not merely as a member of some culture or society. "The soul that sinneth, it shall die,"[1] was his way of expressing the idea that social inheritance and solidarity were not the most determinative facts in life. Likewise, the soul which did not sin should live, regardless of what happened to the group of which he was a part. This idea of Ezekiel's went so far in the other direction, from social solidarity to the extreme of individualism, that the idea slowly developed that misfortune of any sort marked out the man upon whom it fell as one who was out of harmony with God, while prosperity and good fortune were sure signs of God's favor. The canonical books of Job and Ecclesiastes attempt, the one in dramatic, the other in philosophic form, to correct the oversimplified view that suffering and misfortune were the result of sin. It might well be that at times they were, but there was no necessary connection between misfortune and badness of life. These two books went profoundly into the whole matter of suffering. They developed the idea that there are inscrutable elements in God which can never be understood and explained by humans; and further that whoever serves God cannot be separated from Him, and that the full process of judgment need not be worked out upon this earth, but may come to its full resolution in the after life.

That the creative and sustaining God was working through individuals as much as He had ever worked through nations was a peculiarly bracing idea to the Jews. Though they had no corporate life which they could direct themselves, none the less, they had private lives with which no one could interfere, interior worlds of their own which no foreign forces could invade. Their nation might never again arise, but that in itself did not make

impossible any contribution to life by Jews. To know thus that they were individually important and significant was a tremendously powerful and stimulating thought to the Jews, and radically altered their attitude under oppression. This was one of the most influential teachings of Apocalyptic, and one of the most valuable.

But these writers of apocalypses had more to say. They extolled the glories of the after-life. Death was not the end of life. It could not be if there was to be a judgment after death. The whole idea that following death there would be a balancing of the inequalities of life was dependent upon some sort of conscious, continuing existence after the death of the body. The writers do not agree on the precise nature of this after-life, nor upon the exact way in which it will be entered. But that life on earth was not the end of a conscious and morally satisfying existence, they had no doubts. Therefore, even should outward conditions lead to death, the individual was not sunk without trace. He who was faithful to the law of God had before him the prospect of a life in which he would live in the presence of his creator, and be rewarded according to the works he had done while he lived on earth.

This judgment according to works was variously conceived. By some of the Apocalyptists it was thought to take place in this life. Others set it forth as being a Messianic judgment which should take place in the Messianic age at the end of the present order of things. But whether it was thought of as temporal or in the Messianic age, it was always, in the last analysis, God's judgment, even though the actual carrying out of its terms might be in the hands of the Messiah. For in apocalyptic literature in general, the Messiah is a subordinate figure, presented, when he is presented at all, as a regent of God, an executor of judgment, and never as a Co-ordinate with the Almighty.

In some of the apocalypses, there is no mention of an actual Messiah at all, only of a kingdom which is Messianic in character in the sense that it represents a breaking into history of the life of the Almighty One in so decisive a way that all life and its conditions are radically changed, purged, and cleansed. At the inception of this kingdom, or just preceding it, it was predicted great calamities would take place upon the earth: convulsions in nature, disturbances in heaven and earth and sea, pestilence and plague, spectacular attacks by the pests of earth which would be given unprecedented power over men. All manner of disturbance would occur during these Messianic Woes, as they were called, and their beginning would be the herald of the coming age in which the wicked would meet their just doom and the righteous would finally enter the life of bliss for which their deeds had qualified them. All of these things were held to be imminent, coming soon, almost present; at any moment God might break through into history, to glorify His people and to judge the wicked.

To sum up the apocalyptic teachings in brief, they were that the God of the Israelites is the God of the whole earth, who holds its destiny in his hands. He works as effectively in and through individuals as He does through nations, and it is no sign of His disfavor that calamity comes. What is important to people is to live by His precepts, since there is coming a time of judgment in which men will stand or fall depending upon their prior deeds. Those who are faithful will reign eternally with their God in Heavenly places, while those who are disobedient will go into everlasting punishment. And all of this is soon to come.

The Apocalyptists were attempting, in a theoretical way, to set forth the true nature of the heavenly world, and to give a blue print of the future age, in which the Messianic expectations would finally be realized.

1. Porter, F. C., "Messages of the Apocalyptic Writers", p. 64.

2. Porter, F. C., "Messages of the Apocalyptic Writers", p. 66.

Thus they attempted to strengthen the hearts and hopes of a discouraged and oppressed people, to give them nerve and fortitude to go on, to give back to them their faith in themselves, in their God, in their ultimate destiny. The theoretical pattern of the future life did not prove to be correct. The imminent break through of God into history did not occur, the old patterns of life continued to exist, the rise of the triumphant Jewish commonwealth remained a dream. From this point of view, therefore, the Apocalyptists have little or nothing of decisive importance to say to a modern world.

In the words of F. C. Porter,

> We cannot accept their descriptions of heaven, of God's throne, or of the angels, their names and functions, as a revelation of hidden realities. They are at most figurative and imaginative representations or symbols of faith in God and a spiritual realm.[1]

But if the theoretical and definitely theological messages of the apocalyptists have nothing to say to us, that is not true of the practical message which they brought to their readers. That message of hope and anticipation, which was so great a factor in the strengthening of Jewish nerve under oppression, proves of utmost importance to any generation in which there is pressure brought to bear upon the people of God.

> Daniel and his successors have grasped the idea of human history as a unity, as proceeding according to a rational plan and bound to issue in a worthy consummation. The strangeness and perplexity of their present was to be understood in the light of the past and the future. If they could find their place in world history they would understand what baffled them in present conditions. This concept of world history goes back to the prophets and belongs to Israel's monotheism, the unity of history being a corollary of the unity of God. But the apocalypses develop and apply it with a new range and consciousness. It is true that they pushed their faith too far in a deterministic direction. The present rule of evil was divinely decreed, and the day of its end was set. Good men had nothing to do but wait for the next act in the divine drama. Yet we should recognize the truth for which they stood.[2]

1. "The Gospel and Its Tributaries", pp. 45, 46.

2. Not all apocalypses were pseudonymous. For example, "the Shepherd of Hermas", which is partly an apocalypse, is not.

We should not forget that apocalyptic ideas, bizarre though some of them appear, were not at all out of line with the great development of basic ideas of the Hebrew-Jewish mind. Hope for the Kingdom of God had always been central in Israel. Out of faith in the one righteous God there had inevitably sprung the belief that in the end He would be the recognized sovereign of the whole world. Apocalyptic was but the imaginative statement of this great primary belief. Indeed, it was inevitable that such an overarching concept should have been put in forms of highly figured symbolism. In this regard E. F. Scott remarks,

> Christian ideas are still apprehended most vividly through the apocalyptic imagery. This is apparent, not only from the place it has always held in popular belief, but from its employment in the highest arts and poetry. Religion cannot live on abstractions. The assumption that it might do so was the fatal error of the old dogmatic theology; and in modern times we are only repeating this error when we try to resolve Christianity into a purely spiritual or ethical system--freeing it, we suppose, from all that is temporary and fantastic. Symbolism must always be the natural language of religion, and in the apocalyptic beliefs, the gospel possesses a noble and expressive symbolism, from which its essential teaching can never be separated without serious loss.[1]

Thus apocalyptic literature expressed its reading of the truth about the world scene, and left its mark upon the people and the writing of its time. And thus, it is in terms of that influence that we must attempt to interpret the Apocalypse of John. This book is without doubt the noblest of apocalypses. Commentators without end, and with scant dissent, have made good that claim. The regular features of Apocalyptic are developed in the book, along with certain special characteristics with which we must now deal. For the "Revelation of John" is quite unique among writings of its genre.

In the first instance, it differs from most apocalypses[2] by being avowedly the work of "John, your brother and partaker with you in the tribulation

1. Revelation 1:4; 1:9; 22:6.

2. Scott, Ernest Findlay, "The Book of Revelation", p. 31.

> His message, indeed, derives its weight from this fact, that the readers are personally acquainted with the man who sends it. They have learned to trust him as a wise and devoted teacher, as a genuine prophet, as their fellow-sufferer in the Christian cause. Writing to his own Churches, he could not have disguised himself under a borrowed name, even if he had wished to; and by doing so he would have deprived his message of the best part of its power.

3. Revelation 1:9.

and kingdom and patience which are in Jesus."[1] This is not an anonymous or pseudonymous work, but the signed work of a well-known and influential Christian teacher.[2] No doubt the major purpose of the work: the encouragement of the Asian Christians to stand firm in their faith no matter what might happen, would have been less well served by a work purporting to come from a hero of the past than from the hand of some heroic Christian of the then present generation who was even at the time of his writing paying the price of discipleship upon the prison island of Patmos. Such a message, bearing the "postmark", so to speak, of persecution and stedfastness upon it would assuredly have a remarkable effect upon wavering brethren.

In signing his work John accepted a large risk. Every piece of mail which left the island of Patmos must have been very carefully scrutinized by the Roman censors for evidences of treasonous material. It is not likely that John was the only man who was "in the isle called Patmos for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus."[3] Other leaders as well probably were imprisoned there. In such a case the watchfulness of the authorities would most certainly have been redoubled.

Of course, that may have been a reason why John had to write in his own name. The authorities may have prohibited anything leaving the island which was not under the name of an individual who was known to be there. A supposed pseudonymous work might have awakened more suspicion than a signed apocalypse. But in any event the writer stood in grave peril. If the censor should begin to pierce through the symbolism to the real message which lay interlineally in it, the gravest consequences would ensue for the sender.

1. Kiddle, Martin, "The Revelation of St. John", p. xxxiii.

Or perhaps the author accepted peril of another kind. It is not unlikely that the message may have left the island secretly and illegally, being smuggled out in defiance of Roman regulations, in order that a more plain and direct message might be sent. Were this the method of transmission, the danger of apprehension would be very great, and the results surely disastrous if the strategem were discovered. Death would probably have been the penalty for both sender and bearer.

Thus it is with a fine disregard of consequences that John writes and sends his letter to the Seven Churches of Asia. They are in need of a counsel of stedfastness. They need to be awakened to a new sense of the dignity and power and beauty of the Christian life. They need an exhortation to patience and faithfulness. Such a message he is qualified to send, both because he himself has been faithful even though imprisoned for his faith, and because he is a leader of recognized stature among them. He can speak with an authority which they will readily grant. He knows and understands them; they have respect and admiration and affection for him.

No discussion of the Apocalypse can pass over the question of the identity of this man whose name was John. While it is not specifically germane to the subject under discussion, still we pause a moment to indicate some of the major lines of thought in this matter. It is a subject which must prove disappointing if we seek a definite and precise answer.

> No subject of Biblical studies has provoked such elaborate and prolonged discussion among scholars as that of the authorship of the five books of the New Testament which are traditionally ascribed to "John" (the Fourth Gospel, the three Epistles of John, and Revelation). And no discussion has been so bewildering, disappointing, and unprofitable. The student who attempts to follow the innumerable lines of inquiry is soon caught in a maze of conflicting arguments brought forward to support the rival theories, and invariably finds himself unable to reach any definite conclusion concerning the authorship of at least some, if not all, of the books concerned.[1]

1. Revelation 1:3; 19:10; 22:7, 9, 18.

2. "Dialogue With Trypho", LXXXI.

3. "Fragments", VI.

The indefiniteness grows out of the ambiguity of the internal evidence. The Apocalypse was authored by one "John", on its own repeated statement. But any qualification of the name, any further points of identification, are lacking in the book. Not only is there no mention made of the author's status being that of an apostle,[1] but in several locations he speaks of himself as being a prophet, though not by way of assuming any peculiar authority thereby.

The general theories about authorship have been (1) that John, the apostle, the familiar son of Zebedee was the writer. As early as Justin Martyr[2] this position was held, and was, in fact, not challenged in the early church until the time of Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria (249 - 265, the dates of his bishopric). This pupil of Origen was the first to point out the differences in style between the Apocalypse and the gospel which bears the title <u>According to John</u>, and to comment upon the fact that identification is by no means clear cut and certain. He added, furthermore, that there were many Johns to be found in the early church, that in the city of Ephesus there were two monuments to the name of John, an indication that more than one had lived in that city.[3] At this point Papias joins Dionysius in setting forth the figure of one of these Johns who seems to have been known as the Presbyter, or Elder.

From that time until the present, the main arguments about the authorship of the Johannine writings of the New Testament have focussed upon one or the other of these hypotheses; i.e., that they are the product of John the Apostle or of John the Elder.

Almost the only point at which there is general agreement is that the author of the Apocalypse is not the same man as he who wrote the gospel. Differences of style and of modes of thought are at opposite poles, al-

1. Swete, Henry B., "The Apocalypse of St. John", clxxxv.

2. Scott, Ernest Findlay, "The Book of Revelation", p. 35.

though some similarities may be noted.

For the apostolic authorship the vast body of conservative scholarship has declared itself, though not without reservation in view of the extreme inconclusiveness of the evidence. Thus Swete puts the case with clarity:

> While inclining to the traditional view which holds that the author of the Apocalypse was the Apostle John, the present writer desires to keep an open mind upon the question. Fresh evidence may at any time be produced which will turn the scale in favor of the Elder. There are those whom this indecision will disappoint, but it is best frankly to confess the uncertainty which besets the present state of our knowledge. We cannot yet with safety go far beyond the dictum of Dionysius: ὅτι μὲν οὖν Ἰωάννης ἐστὶν ὁ τῆς τοιαύτης γραφῆς, αὐτῷ λέγοντι πιστευτέον πόθος δὲ αὐτὸς ἀνήκει[1]

Swete is joined in this position by Alford, Milligan, Trench, Simcox, C. A. A. Scott, and others among fairly recent commentators.

For John the Elder as author are Düsterdieck, Ewald, Bleek, Bousset, and, with rather more caution, E. F. Scott and Moffatt. Scott remarks that

> its author was certainly called John; he was a leader in the Asian church; he lived in the period to which the Elder belonged: his interest like the Elder's, was apocalyptic.[2]

The most revolutionary new view of the matter is one set forth by Charles in his monumental two-volume work in the International Critical Commentary Series. He declares that the Apocalypse was the work of one "John the Seer", who is distinct both from John the Apostle and John the Elder. Describing him, Charles says that

> John the Seer, to whom we owe the Apocalypse, was a Jewish Christian who had in all probability spent the greater part of his life in Galilee before he emigrated to Asia Minor and settled in Ephesus....While he wrote in Greek, he thought in Hebrew, and frequently translated Hebrew idioms literally into Greek ....John the Seer was quite distinct from the author

1. Charles, R. H., "The Revelation of St. John", Vol. I., xxi, xxii.

2. Full discussion of the question of authorship can be found in:

Beckwith, "The Apocalypse of John", pp. 343 - 393
Charles, "Revelation", pp. xxxviii - l
Moffatt, "The Expositor's Greek Testament", Vol. V, pp. 320 - 327
Alford, "The Greek Testament", Vol. IV, pp. 198 - 229
Swete, "The Apocalypse of John", clxxiv - clxxxv

3. Scott, Ernest Findlay, "The Literature of the New Testament", p. 282.

4. Revelation 19:13.

5. Revelation 3:7.

6. Revelation 1:17; 2:8; 22:13b.

7. Revelation 22:13.

> of the Gospel and Epistles. That the Gospel and Epistles were from one and the same author who was probably John the Elder, I have shown below. That these two Johns belonged to the same religious circle, or that the author of the Gospel was a pupil of John the Seer, is not improbable....John the Seer exercised an unquestioned authority over the Churches of the Province of Asia....unhappily the prophet did not live to revise his work, or even to put the materials of 20:4 - 22 into their legitimate order. This task fell.... into the hands of a very unintelligent disciple.[1]

This is a stimulating theory of Charles, who must be listened to with respect, since he is without much question the most erudite specialist who has written in our day upon the Apocalypse. Still, one has the feeling of a case well-stated but not proved in his introduction of this third John into the already crowded arena.

Surely the most logical position in this confusion is that taken by Kiddle, Case, and those others whose views have already been quoted, that, while opinion may lean toward one or the other writer, it is really quite impossible to decide on the basis of the available evidence.[2]

Another point at which this Apocalypse differs from the genre in general is in the importance which is given to the idea of the Messiah.

> In Jewish apocalyptic, the Messiah was never more than a subordinate figure; in Revelation, Christ is seated on the right hand of God, and all that happens in heaven or on earth is in some manner related to him. Not only is Christ made central, but his preeminent act is his death. In Jewish apocalypses, the Messiah is never conceived as suffering, while in Revelation Christ is exalted to the highest place because he died.[3]

For all practical purposes, the Apocalyptist appears to co-ordinate Christ and God. Christ is called "the Word of God"[4]; "the Holy and True"[5]; "the First and the Last"[6]; "the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End."[7] All of these titles are used in the book of God Himself.

1. Revelation 3:21; 7:17; 12:5; 22:1, 3.

2. Revelation 5:12.

3. Revelation 4:10.

4. "The Apocalypse of John", p. clxii.

5. Swete, Henry B., "The Apocalypse of John", p. clxii.

6. John 10:30.

7. Revelation 19:13.

8. Revelation 2:18.

9. Revelation 3:8.

10. Revelation 5:6.

11. Revelation 7:17.

Moreover Christ sits with God upon His throne.[1] Worship which is offered to Christ[2] is described in the same terms as that which is offered to God,[3] and the same hymn of praise is sung to both Father and Son. Many designations which are used in the Old Testament exclusively of God are employed in the Apocalypse to describe the Son.

Still further, Christ has prerogatives like to those of God. In Swete's words,

> He searches men's hearts (ii. 23); He can kill and restore to life (i. 18, ii. 23); He receives a worship which is rendered without distinction to God (V. 13); His priests are also priests of God (xx. 6); He occupies one throne with God (xxii. 1, 3); and shares one sovereignty (xi. 15).[4]

Yet though there is an apparent coordination of Christ with God, the Apocalypse retains its rigid monotheism, with no consciousness of "any tendency to ditheism."[5] Nowhere is the name of God given to Christ. The Seer does not quote, as does the writer of the Gospel of John, the word of Jesus, "I and the Father are one".[6] Christ is, for the Seer, the Word of God,[7] the Son of God;[8] He can call God His God.[9] Yet He is seen to be, to all intents and purposes, God active in human life, the eternal Son of God. In all that He is and does, He is so at one with the Father that he becomes a true revelation of God within human history. It must be especially emphasized that this is true of Christ in His character as redemptive Lamb. This Lamb is pictured standing in the midst of the throne of God:

> And I saw in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain;[10]
>
> the Lamb that is in the midst of the throne.[11]

Elsewhere the throne of God is declared to be the throne of the redemptive Lamb:

1. Revelation 22:1.

2. Revelation 22:3.

3. Charles, R. H., "The Revelation of St. John", Vol. I., pp. cix, cx.

4. Revelation 15:4.

5. Revelation 16:5.

6. Revelation 6:10.

7. Revelation 15:3.

> And he showed me a river of water of life, bright as crystal, proceeding out of the midst of the throne of God and of the Lamb.[1]

> The throne of God and of the Lamb shall be therein.[2]

Thus what is affirmed of God is affirmed likewise of Christ. The Son is the revelation of the Father within the stream of history. So, as the next step in our investigation, we should look briefly at the manner in which the Father is conceived in this Apocalypse. If it seem a backward sort of progress to proceed from consideration of the Son to that of the Father, the words of Charles may have some pertinence:

> If the doctrine of God were drawn only from the direct statements which the Apocalypse makes on this subject, though in some respects it would transcend the level reached in the O. T. (as in its teaching on God's fatherhood, etc.), in many others (such as His infinite mercy and forgiveness) it would fall far short of it. Many scholars have emphasized this peculiarity of the Apocalypse, and insisted accordingly on the Jewish character of its doctrine of God. But to draw such a conclusion betrays a total misapprehension of the question at issue. The Christian elements are not dwelt upon because they can all be inferred from what the Book teaches regarding the Son; for all that the Son has and is is derived from the Father. Hence the conception of the Father--must be completed from that of the Son.[3]

The character of God is conceived in terms of holiness, righteousness, and truth. He alone is holy (μόνος ὅσιος):

> Who shall not fear, O Lord, and glorify thy name? for only thou art holy.[4]

> And I heard the angel of the waters saying, Righteous art thou, who art, and who wast, thou Holy One.[5]

He is the True One, who keeps the covenant with His people:

> And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Master, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?[6]

> And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, Great and marvellous are thy works, O Lord God, the Almighty; righteous and true are thy ways, thou king of the ages.[7]

1. Revelation 16:7.

2. Revelation 19:1.

3. Revelation 6:17.

4. Revelation 11:18.

5. Revelation 19:15.

6. Revelation 6:10.

7. Revelation 19:2.

> And I heard the Altar saying, Yea, O Lord God, the Almighty, true and righteous are thy judgments.[1]
>
> After these things I heard as it were a great voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, Hallelujah; Salvation and glory and power belong to our God: for true and righteous are his judgments.[2]

A God who is holy, righteous, and true, is a God who because of those attributes, reacts in wrath and judgment against any manifestation of evil. These qualities are clearly indicated in many a passage of the Apocalypse:

> for the great day of his wrath is come; and who is able to stand?[3]
>
> And the nations were wroth, and thy wrath came, and the time of the dead to be judged.[4]
>
> he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness of the wrath of God, the Almighty.[5]

Out of this concept of the "wrath" of God there arises the doctrine of the vengeance of God for all the wrongs which have been done upon the earth, and the consequent justification of the righteous who have suffered unjustly:

> How long, O Master, the holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?[6]
>
> true and righteous are his judgments; for he hath judged the great harlot, her that corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand;[7]

But lest any should think that He is a God who judges only the wicked, it is expressly declared that He is the judge of all the dead:

> And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat upon it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne; and books were opened: and another book was opened which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of the things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hades gave up

1. Revelation 20:11 - 15.

2. Revelation 1:6a; 2:27b; 3:5b, 21b; 14:1.

3. Revelation 1:4.

4. Revelation 4:8.

5. Revelation 11:17.

6. Revelation 16:5.

7. Revelation 4:9; 10:16.

8. Revelation 15:7.

> the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death, even the lake of fire. And if any was not found written in the book of life, he was cast into the lake of fire.[1]

As stated above, in the quotation from Charles, only by implication is God seen to be a God of mercy and graciousness in this Apocalypse. But there is a good deal of implication. Over and over again He is referred to as the Father of Jesus Christ.[2] Accordingly His attributes must be parallel to those of the Divine Son, whose graciousness and mercy and lovingkindness are beyond compare.

This God who is holy, righteous, true, and gracious, has yet other familiar attributes. In common with the regular Biblical conception, God is presented by the Apocalyptist as being eternal and omnipotent. His everlastingness gives Him a quality of continuity as opposed to the brief temporality of the life of man, and His judgments and decrees are absolute. This quality is described in such passages as these:

> him who is and who was and who is to come;[3]
>
> The Lord God, the Almighty, who was who is and who is to come;[4]
>
> Lord God, the Almighty, who art and who wast;[5]
>
> who art and who wast;[6]
>
> him that liveth for ever and ever;[7]
>
> God who liveth for ever and ever.[8]

The omnipotence of God is clearly and often stated. But it is not an omnipotence rooted in metaphysics; rather it is conceived ethically. There is no hint of the idea that God is pure force which can be applied without restriction or qualification. There are conditions, set by God Himself, upon the application of the force and power which is His without limit.

1. "The Revelation of St. John", Vol. I, p. cx.

2. Revelation 4:11.

3. Revelation 5:13.

4. Revelation 7:12.

5. Revelation 11:15.

6. Revelation 4:8.

7. Revelation 11:17.

8. Revelation 15:3.

9. Revelation 16:14.

10. Revelation 19:6.

11. Revelation 19:15.

God's divine sovereignty will come to its perfect realization with the perfect attainment of Christ's kingdom upon the earth. So each step toward that kingdom is received with rejoicing in heaven. For, as Charles reminds us, "the perfect realization of God's Kingdom in the world is the one divine event toward which the whole creation moves."[1]

Again and again in the Apocalypse spontaneous hymns of praise break forth to God, reinforcing the idea of the progression of the world toward an appointed end:

> Worthy art thou, our Lord and our God, to receive the glory and the honor and the power: for thou didst create all things, and because of thy will they were, and were created;[2]
>
> Unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb, be the blessing and the honor, and the glory, and the dominion; for ever and ever;[3]
>
> Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honor, and power, and might, be unto our God forever and ever. Amen;[4]
>
> The kingdom of the world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ: and he shall reign for ever and ever.[5]

The phrase most frequently upon the mind of the Apocalyptist as he things of the omnipotence of God is κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὁ παντοκράτωρ, Lord God Almighty. These words resound throughout the book:

> Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God, the Almighty;[6]
>
> O Lord God, the Almighty;[7]
>
> Great and marvellous are thy works, O Lord God, the Almighty;[8]
>
> the great day of God, the Almighty;[9]
>
> Hallelujah: for the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigneth;[10]
>
> the winepress of the fierceness of the wrath of God, the Almighty;[11]

1. Revelation 21:22.

2. Revelation 6:10.

3. Revelation 11:15; 14:1, 3; 15:4.

4. Revelation 22:5.

5. Revelation 4:11.

6. "The Apocalypse of John", p. clxiii.

> And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb are the temple thereof.[1]

Other less frequent designations of God describe Him as Master (δεσπότης)[2]; as the Lord, and our Lord (ὁ κύριος, ὁ κύριος ἡμῶν)[3]; as Lord God (κύριος ὁ θεός)[4]; as our Lord and our God (ὁ κύριος καὶ ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν).[5]

It is impossible to state clearly the doctrine of God in the Apocalypse without much overlapping with the Seer's Christology. As Swete puts it,

> The enigma meets us everywhere in the New Testament, but in no book is it so perplexing....as in the Apocalypse of John. It has been urged that "the point of view of the Seer is continually changing. He conceives of Jesus now as the highest of the creatures, now as the eternal beginning and end of all things.... to us each of these is a definite and separate conception, while to him such definiteness and separation did not exist." (F. Palmer, Drama of the Apocalypse. p. 105) But this explanation is doubly unsatisfactory. The Seer's consciousness of the gulf which parts the creature from the Uncreated was far from indefinite, twice he represents an angel as flatly refusing divine honours--see thou do it not....worship God (19:10, 22:9); the assumption of divine names by the Roman Emperors, was in his judgment the damning sin of the Empire. Nor is it quite fair to charge him with shifting his ground from time to time; from the first his Christ is a complex conception in which human and Divine characteristics co-exist. On the other hand we should doubtless err if we read into the Seer's vision the precision of the Nicene or the Chalcedonian Christology. An intuitive faith carries him beyond the point reached by the understanding; he knows that the identification of the ascended Christ with the Almighty Father is not inconsistent with strict monotheism, but he does not....ask himself how this can be.[6]

The Seer simply writes as though God and Christ were correlative. So as the Father is set forth explicitly in terms of power and might and judgment, he is no less clearly set forth, though implicitly, in the doctrine of Christ, in terms of redemption and love and sacrifice. The omnipotence of God is not only morally, but redemptively, conditioned. Thus divine

1. Stevens, George Barker, "The Theology of the New Testament", p. 542.

omnipotence and divine love and self-sacrifice are linked together inseparably for the world's redemption. The Apocalyptist

> looked to see a lion and beheld a lamb. He looked to see power and force whereby the foes of his faith should be destroyed, and he saw love and gentleness by which they should be conquered by being transformed into friends.... The might of Christ is the power of love. The captive train which he leads in his triumphal march is composed of those who are bound to him by the golden chains of love and gratitude.[1]

A third difference between the Johannine Apocalypse and the genre in general is the inclusion of the letters in the second and third chapters. These Letters to the Seven Churches are quite without parallel in the history of apocalyptic writing. Indeed, they are so distinctly different from apocalyptic forms of expression that various commentators have suggested that they were not a part of the original production at all, but are a later addition to the book. Below, in this discussion, this objection will be dealt with, and it will be seen that the Letters constitute a very important, indeed abasic, part of the whole apocalypse, though they do undeniably comprise a distinct section of the book. In these Letters, the usual imagery and symbolism of apocalyptic are at a minimum, being restricted in general to the phrases descriptive of Christ and the promises of reward to the one who overcomes. For the rest, the letters are straightforward and easily intelligible statements of the conditions in which the churches found themselves, and of their own internal situations, with which the Apocalyptist shows himself to be thoroughly conversant.

Despite the avowed authorship of Revelation, its expanded doctrine of the Messiah, and the inclusion of the Letters to the Seven Churches, all different from usual apocalyptic practice, this book is without question a representative of that class of writing. In every essential way it is an apocalypse.

1. Porter, F. C., "Messages of the Apocalyptic Writers", pp. 170, 171.

> A little reflection will make it clear that the book is certainly an apocalypse, even though there is something new in it which may be ascribed to the new Christian spirit. Like Daniel, the book of Revelation was written at a time when the true religion of the writer and his circle was threatened both by the allurements and by the violence of the ruling heathen power. It aims to establish wavering faith, to warn apostates, and especially to encourage believers to resist foreign influences and to endure trial even to death, in view of the speedy coming of God as Judge and Savior. Like Daniel, it is a revelation of the meaning and end of the history of the world, and not chiefly of the destiny of souls after death. Many other features show its close relationship to Jewish apocalypses. Thus our book uses highly wrought and fantastic imagery, derived in part from the Old Testament, but also from various apocalyptical traditions of more or less foreign origin, more or less freely adapted to the present purpose. Again, it constantly uses the vision form of revelation, with angelic interpreters. It explains the origin and present excess of evil as due to angelic powers and their conflicts, and regards the Roman Empire as embodying the chief spirit of evil, or as his chief agent in the world. But still further its whole outline of the future, its philosophy of history, and its eschatological doctrines, are in the closest way parallel to those of the Jewish apocalypses.[1]

The historical background of the Apocalypse is the historical situation in the Roman Empire and especially the worship of the emperors and its enforcement in Asia Minor. Under Rome a great number of nations and races had been fused together. One nation had emerged out of a heterogeneous group of states. At least, the nation was one on the surface. But it was widely recognized that the only cohesive force in the Empire was the power of the Roman legions, a power which, being external, and consisting only of force of arms, was not sufficient to bring about a true unity. A unifying principle was sorely needed to consolidate the gains which Rome had made by conquest.

The development of the cult of Emperor worship was in answer to this need. Some sort of national religion was a sine qua non to the ancient mind.

1. 81 - 96 A. D.

There was a widespread belief that without such a faith there was really no nation at all. The establishment of Emperor worship as a sort of quasi-political cult, more or less co-ordinate with the local religions of the people, and not meant at all to supersede them, provided the Empire with the principle of concretion which it needed to link the parts in a fellowship which transcended all of the formidable barriers which acted centrifugally to break the fabric of Empire life.

The basis of the cult was devotion to the Emperor, who was conceived as summing up in his own person the meaning and significance of the Empire itself. The method of the cult was the dropping of incense upon an altar, in token of the allegiance which the worshipper owed to the Empire under which he lived. It was a ceremony which combined in one act the elements of patriotism and religion. A stroke of positive genius, it resulted in a much closer tie between the various parts of the Empire, and with very little invasion of personal conscience. For no one but the monotheists did the addition of another deity to the pantheon create the slightest bit of difficulty. Only Christians and Jews had any trouble.

The Jews, by virtue of their ancient and stubborn monotheism, had already gained some concessions in the matters of worship, and were not greatly affected by the development of the new cult. Christians, however, although they were in general earlier considered to be a sect of the Jews, did not in practice later necessarily inherit the privileges of the Jews. It was, then, upon the Christians that the heaviest blows fell when they refused to participate in the pagan cult honoring the Emperor.

The intransigent opposition to the Emperor cult was always dangerous for the Christians, since it rendered them vulnerable to reprisals and punishments,[1] but it was not until the reign of Domitian, that the danger

became acute. Previous emperors had not taken empire-wide action against those who would not participate in the cult. They had been willing enough to accept the homage when and where it was rendered, but no thorough-going attempt had been made to establish the worship as a compulsory and universal factor in Empire-allegiance.

There had been, it is true, periods of persecution, notably under the unspeakable Nero, but these had been local in character, and their influence had not set off other persecutions in far-flung sectors of the Empire.

Under Domitian, the haphazard and sporadic attempts to develop the cult were vastly augmented. Worship at the altar of the Emperor began to be associated with loyalty to the Empire. Thorough-going attempts were made to enlist every person in the cult. Domitian was a man of greater ability and vision than his predecessors had been, and he saw clearly enough the enormous advantage which lay at hand if the Emperor-cult could but be made a standard form of worship through all the far-flung outposts of empire.

While we have no edict from his hand to indicate the beginning of enforcement, it is quite generally held that under this emperor the extension of emperor worship became a persecuting and oppressive policy. The immediate result of that policy was, for Christians, the probability of imprisonment, beating, torture, perhaps even death. When persecution drew so close, there was a strong compulsion to escape from it, if that could be. The Christian communities were under a terrible pressure to conform in the necessary degree, and thus to maintain themselves free from punishment and the penalties of law. And, from the other side, came an equal pressure to maintain the pure basis of the faith, which was in diametric opposition to the whole idea of giving divine worship to a man, no matter how

1. "The Book of Revelation", p. 39.

2. Revelation 2:13.

exalted and symbolic his position might be. E. F. Scott puts the case thus:

> in this cult of the emperor earthly power was made supreme. The ordinary pagan religions were false; this one was not only false, but was the negation of all religion. It openly declared that the State, which existed solely for this world, was the ultimate good. Force and wealth, as incarnated in the emperor, were to be acknowledged as the realities before which all men must bow. This was the underlying cause of that intense hatred which the Caesar-worship aroused in all Christians. Other forms of idolatry, however base, contained in them at least the suggestion of a higher world. This one declared the present world to be final, and forbade men to look beyond it.[1]

What the Christians needed sorely was a clear-sounded call to loyalty, which would serve to stiffen their resistance, and to strengthen their morale in the face of imminent persecution. The joyful acceptance of martyrdom which many Christians were later to evince in the face of persecution, and which had already been demonstrated in the Neronian persecutions at Rome, was probably not a motive which swayed all Christians. There were some who stood faithful through everything. At Pergamum, one Antipas had been slain for his faith, "where Satan's throne is," i.e., in the neighborhood of the seat of Emperor-worship in that city.[2] But this predis position to be faithful unto death was not unanimous, by any means. For many a disciple, loyalty to Christ hung in the balance, waiting for something to strengthen the determination to take and maintain a Christian stand.

The Apocalypse was, no doubt, that "something" for many members of the churches. John the Apocalyptist, himself a prisoner because of his stedfastness to Christ, could bear telling testimony to the power of the faith to sustain and comfort the Christians even in the midst of persecution. Though the Emperor might appear to be all-powerful, and though his will might triumph at the time, yet he was not the ultimate controller of the

destinies of men. God alone held those destinies, and He could be counted upon to overcome the evil so rampant in the world. In the long run, evil could not stand before God. So the believers ought to take a firm stand and refuse to have anything to do with the new Emperor-worship which declared that the final authority was human. Such a view led inevitably to a crass sort of materialism which denied everything which Christians held dear. On other issues there might perhaps be some compromise, but to compromise the faith at this point was to destroy it.

The persecution of non-conforming persons was especially severe in the Province of Asia, because that area was the strongest center of the cult of the Emperor. The first temples to the Emperors had been reared in Asia Minor, Ephesus having a temple in the days of Augustus. It appears, as will be shown below, that Pergamum was the center of the Caesar-cult in Asia Minor. In the province a special priesthood had been formed to maintain the cult, with official powers to force conformity upon everyone.

As well as being the chief fountain-head of the Caesar-cult, Asia Minor was also the chief stronghold of Christianity. Paul's long ministry in Ephesus, and his many contacts with other parts of the province had helped the area to become a vigorous center of Christianity. Many churches flourished in the cities, and the government itself had to reckon with the growing power of the movement.

With both the center of the new cult and the center of Christian opposition to it being located in Asia, that province became the natural battleground. It is, accordingly, the Asian Christians to whom John addresses his message of hope and encouragement to stiffen their resistance and to establish their faith.

1. Revelation 1:1 - 8.

2. Revelation 6:1 - 17; 8:1.

His apocalypse moves in an orderly and spectacular fashion from vision to vision, leading ever more deeply into the meaning of things and the ultimate fate of the world and its people.[1] After a short introduction, the first great vision of the book is introduced, a vision of the glorified Christ, risen and immanent among the churches. This vision occupies the remainder of the first chapter, and is introductory to the Letters to the Seven churches of Asia, which follow in chapters two and three. These Letters describe the situations of the churches, and their response to those situations; they exhort, admonish, praise, threaten, as the occasion demands, but always with the actual, existing facts concerning the church in mind, and always in terms of relationship to the immanent Christ. In this section of the book there is no large use of symbolism.

Chapters four and five are concerned with another great vision, this time a twin vision, first of God the Creator upon His throne, then of the redemptive Christ in His character of a slain Lamb to whom glory and praise are due.

Following this, in chapters six to eight, there is the presentation of a series of plagues which, in the last days of the present age, will fall upon the world. These plagues are set in motion in the heavenly world as the seals of a seven-sealed book are opened one by one.[2] A standard feature of apocalyptic literature, these plagues follow the general pattern established by that literature, consisting of natural upheavals and catastrophes, displacement of heavenly bodies, destruction of that upon which mankind depends for its existence, and disclocation of human relationships. These plagues had come to be known as the Messianic Woes.

Just before the breaking of the seventh seal the cycle is interrupted for a scene in which the people of God are sealed against the woes

1. But see Charles, R. H., "The Revelation of St. John", Vol. I, p. xxiii, and elsewhere. He vigorously contends for a chronological sequence throughout the Messianic Woes, as well as through the Apocalypse as a whole.

which are yet to come. 144,000 are sealed, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes. Also contained in this passage, which comprises the seventh chapter, is a vision of an uncounted multitude of the redeemed in heaven.

The opening of the seventh seal, at the beginning of chapter eight, leads to another series of seven events, this time the blowing of seven trumpets. This passage does not represent any large forward motion in the time scheme of the book, but is a heightening by repetition of the Messianic woes, or perhaps serves to expand them, and follows the same basic pattern established in the series of seven seals.[1] Chapters eight through eleven are concerned with these trumpets, with an interlude at chapter ten, in which further prophecies are communicated to the Apocalyptist by the agency of an angel with a little book. After this interlude two prophecies, one concerning the siege of the Holy City, the other the ministry of two divine witnesses, follow, comprising the first fourteen verses of chapter eleven.

The blowing of the seventh trumpet is followed by the announcement that full sovereignty has been assumed by God and Christ.

Chapter twelve contains a vision of a sun-clad woman who bears a Son, who is immediately attacked by a great red dragon. The dragon is represented as having been cast from heaven upon the earth where his power will finally be broken. Meanwhile he pursues the woman, who escapes, and makes war with her children. In chapter thirteen visions are seen of two fearsome beasts, epitomes of the power of evil in the world, as expressed in the Roman empire and the Imperial priesthood. Chapter fourteen sets forth a counter-vision of the slain Lamb standing on Mount Zion, a proclamation of impending judgment and salvation for the righteous, and a triumphant vision of the Son of Man in power.

1. Revelation 19:1 - 10.

At chapter fifteen and continuing through sixteen, the third in the series of presentations of the Messianic Woes is set out, this time in the form of the pouring out of seven vials, filled with the wrath of God, upon the earth.

Then, at the conclusion of the visions of the Messianic Woes, there occurs, in chapters seventeen through the first part of nineteen, a vision of judgment upon the great city of Rome, symbolically called Babylon. First, at the outset of seventeen, a vision is seen of a woman sitting upon seven hills. The latter portion of the chapter interprets the symbols in which she has been described so clearly that the intent to show forth Rome is unmistakeable. Next, in chapter eighteen, a song of triumph is sung over the ruin and downfall of that city, which downfall is foreseen in prophecy. While the men who had made their livelihood from serving her needs stand mournfully by, her destruction is terribly accomplished, whereupon in heaven a veritable Hallelujah chorus breaks out.[1]

Now the book moves toward its triumphant climax. The closing verses of chapter nineteen deal with the return of Christ and the overthrow of the beasts who had wrought such evil havoc upon the earth. Chapter twenty pictures the binding of the evil power typified by Satan, the first resurrection, the Millennial reign, the final conflict with evil in which the escaped powers of darkness are finally destroyed, and the last judgment and resurrection. Then follows, in the last two chapters, the vision of the New Jerusalem in all its glory, the first things having passed away and the whole creation having been renewed through the power and the intervention of God. The book comes to its close in a series of admonitions, warnings, and assurances.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PROLOGUE TO THE APOCALYPSE

THE APOCALYPSE OF THE BLESSED APOSTLE JOHN

CHAPTER ONE

The New Testament in English
A New Translation, by Father Ronald A. Knox

This is a revelation from Jesus Christ, which God has allowed him to make known to his servants, of things which must soon find their due accomplishment. And he has sent his angel to disclose the pattern of it to his servant John, one who bore witness for God's word, and for the truth concerning Jesus Christ, as his own eyes have seen it. A blessing on him who reads this, and on all who listen to these words of prophecy, and keep true to their message; the time is close at hand.

Thus John writes to the seven churches in Asia, Grace and peace be yours, from him who is and ever was, and is still to come, and from the seven spirits that stand before his throne; and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, first-born of the risen dead, who rules over all earthly kings. He has proved his love for us, by washing us clean from our sins in his own blood, and made us a royal race of priests, to serve God, his Father; glory and power be his through endless ages, Amen. Behold, he comes with clouds about him, seen by every eye, seen by those who wounded him, and he shall bring lamentation to all the tribes of the earth. So it must be, Amen. I am Alpha, I am Omega, the beginning of all things and their end, says the Lord God; he who is, and ever was, and is still to come, the Almighty.

I, John, your brother, who share your ill-usage, your royal dignity, and your endurance in Christ Jesus, was set down on the island called Patmos, for love of God's word and of the truth concerning Jesus. And there, on the Lord's day, I fell into a trance, and heard behind me a voice, loud as the call of a trumpet, which said, Write down all thou seest in a book, and send it to the seven churches in Asia, to Ephesus, and Smyrna, and Pergamum, and Thyatira, and Sardis, and Philadelphia, and Laodicea. So I turned, to see what voice it was that was speaking to me. And as I turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks, and in the midst of these seven golden candlesticks one who seemed like a son of man, clothed in a long garment, with a golden girdle about his breast. The hair on his head was like wool snow-white, and his eyes like flaming fire, his feet like orichalc melted in the crucible, and his voice like the sound of water in deep flood, in his right hand were seven stars; from his mouth came a sword sharpened at both its edges; and his face was like the sun when it shines at its full strength. At the sight of him, I fell down at his feet like a dead man; and he, laying his right hand on me, spoke thus: Do not be afraid; I am before all, I am at the end of all, and I live.

I, who underwent death, am alive, as thou seest, to endless ages, and I hold the keys of death and hell. Write down thy vision of what now is, and what must befall hereafter. As for the meaning of the seven stars which thou hast seen in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches thou knowest, and the candlesticks, seven in number, are the seven churches.

1. Revelation 1:1 - 3.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PROLOGUE TO THE APOCALYPSE
REVELATION I

The first chapter of the Apocalypse serves as an introduction to the entire book, and in a specialized way, to the letters to the Seven Churches, which follow in chapters two and three. It is in the first chapter that the general salutation to the Seven Churches is given, and the vision of the Christ is described, which vision forms the basis of parts of the letters, as will be brought out below. Thus, although there is no directly ethical material in this first chapter of the book, a consideration of it is necessary if we are to appreciate fully the letters to the Seven Churches.

The Apocalypse opens with a brief notice which serves the same purpose as a modern title page would do; i. e. to identify the book and its author. In addition, it sets out the general nature of the contents of the work: a revelation of "the things which must shortly come to pass." This opening paragraph reads:

> The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show unto his servants, even the things which must shortly come to pass: and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John; who bare witness of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, even of all things that he saw. Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of the prophecy, and keep the things that are written therein: for the time is at hand.[1]

It is interesting to notice, in view of the widespread popular opinion that the Apocalypse is a book of Mysteries unfathomable, that its own plain statement defines its purpose to be the revelation to the servants of God of what must come to pass in the near future. What mysterious elements there are in the book, and it would be folly to deny that they exist, are the result of a normal blurring of the whole situation with the

1. See Chapter I, p. 10, for a complete list of the Beatitudes and a discussion of the symbolism involved.

2. Revelation 1:4 - 8.

passage of the centuries, so that references which would have been crystal clear to the readers are murky and confused for us because we lack the points of reference which are so necessary in any interpretative process. If we assume, as is often the case, that the Apocalypse is being mysterious for the sake of being mysterious we not only miss the point of the book, but deny to it its own clear statement that it was meant to be a showing forth of things which were, in the author's mind, imminent and certain.

The beatitude, "Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of the prophecy, and keep the things that are written therein," is the first of a series of seven, and marks the first point in the Apocalypse at which the important and pervasive "seven symbolism" makes its appearance.[1]

Following the title there is a salutation to the churches which are to receive the Apocalypse as a letter from John:

> John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from him who is and who was and who is to come; and from the seven spirits that are before his throne; and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins by his blood; and he made us to be a kingdom, to be priests unto his God and Father; to him be the glory and the dominion for ever and ever. Amen. Behold, he cometh with the clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they that pierced him; and all the tribes of the earth shall mourn over him. Even so, Amen. I am the Alpha and the Omega, saith the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.[2]

An epistle was the natural way for John to communicate with the churches of Asia. He speaks to them as one who understands their needs and situations very well, as one who must have been an old friend and counselor. For him to have written in a more formal literary form would not have met either the needs of the churches, or the demands of personal friendship, so well as does this letter. That the Apocalypse is a letter, for all its artful construction, and schematic presentation of material

1. "The Revelation of St. John", pp. xxii, xxiii, xxiv.

is affirmed from internal evidence by Charles:

> We gather from the Apocalypse that John the Seer exercised an unquestioned authority over the Churches of the Province of Asia. To seven of these, chosen by him to be representatives of Christendom as a whole, he wrote his great Apocalypse in the form of a letter....the Apocalypse consists of a Prologue, the Apocalypse proper--consisting of seven distinct parts, and an Epilogue....The seven parts and the Epilogue constitute a letter, 1:4 - 22:21, which, like the Pauline letters, opens with "John to the Seven churches....Grace unto you, and peace, from Him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from Jesus Christ" (1:4 - 5a), and ends with the words, "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen."[1]

Letter writing was one of the earliest forms in which literature was given expression. It was then, as now, a common and valuable way for people to communicate with each other. The overwhelming proportion of the New Testament is composed of letters written by Christian leaders to congregations or individuals. In fact, if we consider this Apocalypse to be a letter, and hold to the view of Ephesians as being a genuine letter and not an introduction to a collection of the Pauline Epistles, the entire New Testament after the Acts of the Apostles falls into this epistolary category. Among the Apocryphal Christian writings and in the literature of the early church fathers, letters played a large and important part. Just by way of example we may mention the letters of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians and the seven epistles of Ignatius to six churches and an individual, some of which are also addressed by our Apocalyptist. Ignatius' epistles included letters to Christians in Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Rome, Philadelphia, Smyrna, and a personal letter to Polycarp, Bishop of the last-named place.

It was a perfectly regular and expected thing for a church leader and a distant congregation, for example, to correspond over matters of policy, life, worship, and doctrine, or for greetings and counsels to be sent to friends of the writer.

1. "The Letters to the Seven Churches", p. 23.

It is not surprising, in view of the common practice, that the Apocalyptist resorted to letter-writing as a means of communicating his message of comfort and encouragement to the churches which he loved, and from which he was separated by the unyielding fact of his banishment and exile upon Patmos.

This Apocalyptic letter, however, differs considerably from the intimate and personal writings of Paul to his friends and churches. Paul's letters constituted something of an advance in letter writing, whether or not he conceived them as being new forms of communication. According to Ramsay, he

> developed the older class of letter into new forms, applied it to new purposes, and placed it upon a much higher plane than it had ever stood upon before....communication by letter became one of the most important, if not the most important, of the agencies for consolidating and maintaining the sense of unity among the scattered members of the one universal church. By means of letters the congregations expressed their mutual affection and sympathy and sense of brotherhood, gave advice with loving freedom and plain speaking to one another, imparted mutual comfort and encouragement, and generally expressed their sense of the common life.[1]

The Apocalyptic letter occupies a place between this new sort of letter and an older and well-known form, the literary epistle. In this latter type of letter, there is a self-consciousness of form and material which is lacking in other letters. It is composed with studied care, and in accordance with certain principles of literary art which can never be concealed from the careful reader. Rather than being a free and informal exchange of ideas, information, and friendship, it is a piece of careful craftsmanship, of artful construction, which warrants the use of the verb "composed" instead of the simpler "written."

John declares his work to be a revelation, an ἀποκάλυψις, yet it displays in many ways a literary artistry totally different from the in-

1. "The Influence of the Old Testament on the Book of Revelation".

2. "The Apocalypse of John", pp. clvi, clvii.

choate and jumbled impressionism in which the interpreter of a vision customarily puts down what he saw. Pure vision is inexpressible in the signs and symbols of writing or of speech, and must depend for its effect upon the awakening in the reader or hearer of a state of mind similar to that which was present in the visionary at the moment of vision. The transcription of a vision, then, is usually an unintelligible piece of gibberish to most people, and makes sense, if at all, only to those who have been experientially in the same "world of vision" as the author.

No one can read the Apocalypse without becoming almost immediately aware of its created as well as its creative character. For one thing, the book is full of the Old Testament. It is true that there is nowhere within it a direct citation of any specific passage of the Old Testament. But quotations are frequently made without citation, and in language, symbolism, visions, imagery, historical references, the Old Testament is used in almost innumerable instances. In a previous discussion,[1] the writer has attempted to trace the line and extent of this influence.

Other apocalyptic books are also used in a background sense, to help John transmit the message which he has for the churches. Earlier Christian writings, especially those which are apocalyptic in character, are also employed by the Seer. According to Swete, there are some remarkable reminiscences of known sayings of Christ. Swete remarks that

> perhaps the most remarkable instance of the formula ὁ ἔχων οὖς ἀκουσάτω which recurs toward the end of each of the messages addressed by the Spirit of Christ to the Churches. The following parallels are also fairly certain: Apoca. iii. 3 with Mt. xxiv. 43; Apoca. iii. 5 with Mt. x. 32; Apoca. xiii. 10 with Mt. xxvi. 52; and Apoc. xxi. 6 with Jo. iv. 10.[2]

As will be seen below, the work of Franz Boll seems to establish clearly that the current pagan astrology, with its roots deep in the older Babylonian and Persian mythologies, was a part of John's thinking.

So, from Jewish, pagan, and Christian sources, as well as from his own visions, the Apocalyptist fashioned this greatest of Christian Apocalypses.

Nor was the fashioning without form. There is a consistency and inherent logic in the development of the ideas of the Apocalypse which impart the strictest sort of form to the book. Take, for example, the usage of numbers throughout the book. In all apocalyptic literature numbers have a symbolic rather than a literal, numerical significance. So here numbers are used quite strictly within the limits of the commonly accepted apocalyptic meanings. Reference has already been made, in the introduction, to the values and ideas which were symbolically inherent in certain numbers, when these were used as a vehicle of apocalyptic imagery. Here all that needs to be pointed out is the fact that John writes to seven churches of Asia, selecting seven from a larger number in order that the seven may be, in a sense, representative of the rest, the number seven having about it the quality of completeness, of well-rounded perfection, in apocalyptic symbolism.

It is, of course, impossible to use a flamboyant imagery with highly symbolic figures making up large parts of the total production, without a high and rigorous degree of consistency in usage. Unless there is a standard usage of certain symbols, interpretation of the writing becomes well-nigh impossible. The Apocalypse does, in fact, demonstrate that kind of consistency. This is a fact which clearly shows the book to be a product of dedicated, and disciplined, imagination, rather than merely the vaporings of a tortured visionary.

In the far larger portion of the Apocalypse, i.e. in practically all of it after the first three chapters, John employs brilliant and highly colored figures of speech as the vehicle of his message. This is not the sort of language which one ordinarily employs who writes a

1. Ramsay, W. M., "The Letters to the Seven Churches", p. 36.

personal letter, either to a single friend, or to a group. But in the letters to the seven churches, which churches appear in the saluation of the Apocalypse for the first time, the Apocalyptist

> makes some attempt to keep up the symbolism which was prescribed by the traditional principles of apocalyptic composition; but such imagery is too awkward and cumbrous for the epistolary form, and has exerted little influence on the Seven Letters. The traditional apocalyptic form breaks in his hands, and he throws away the shattered fragments.[1]

Evidently his personal knowledge of the churches and their life and situation and nature could not contain itself, so that John was forced out of imagery into the plain speech of everyday when he wrote to the Christian groups in the cities which he knew and loved so well. So, when he begins his salutation by saying, "Grace to you and peace from him who was and is and is to come, etc." John was writing not at all in conventional apocalyptic style, but after the manner of a pastor. He never could rid himself of a sense of responsibility for the Asian churches, typified, as we shall see, by the seven of their number which he selected to represent them all.

After the salutation, there follows an account of the way in which the Apocalypse came to be written:

> I John, your brother and partaker with you in the tribulation and kingdom and patience which are in Jesus, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, saying, What thou seest, write in a book and send it to the seven churches: unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamum, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea. And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And having turned I saw seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the candlesticks one like a son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about at the breasts with a golden girdle. And his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; and his feet

1. Revelation 1:9 - 20.

> like unto burnished brass, as if it had been refined in a furnace; and his voice was as the voice of many waters. And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth proceeded a sharp two-edged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength. And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as one dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying, Fear not; I am the first and the last, and the Living one; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forever more, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. Write therefore the things which thou sawest, and the things which are, and the things which shall come to pass hereafter; the mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks are seven churches.[1]

In this, the principal section of his prelude to the Apocalypse, John relates how he came to be in exile on Patmos, a victim of persecution for the sake of the gospel and of his Lord. There, upon a certain Lord's day, he felt the presence of the spirit in extraordinary degree, even though he was denied the privilege of worship in one of the churches which were so dear to him. First he heard a voice, and, upon turning round, he became conscious that the One who had bidden him write what he should see in a book to be sent to the Seven Churches was none other than the Son of Man. The vision, which he describes fully, in terms which later become parts of the individual letters, was so awful to behold that John flung himself face downward upon the earth to escape the sight. Then, laying his hand upon the shoulder of the prostrate Seer, the Christ commissioned him to write what he should see as a message of what "shall come to pass hereafter."

It was from this vision of the risen and glorified Christ moving among the candlesticks that John derived his sublime confidence in the presence with the churches of that same Christ. Thus He who had overcome was in close fellowship with His people who were so sorely set upon and assaulted by the forces of evil. He who had carried His own

1. Scott, Ernest Findlay, "The Book of Revelation", p. 60.

2. Revelation 1:11.

3. Revelation 1:4.

4. Acts 2:9; 6:9; 16:6; etc.

5. Romans 16:5; I Corinthians 16:19; II Corinthians 1:8.

6. I Peter I:1.

7. Quoted by Swete, Henry B., "The Apocalypse of St. John", p. lvi.

cause even through the grave to victory was with His people to help them in their time of need.

All of the evidence indicates that this commissioning vision was actually an experience of a psychic sort, and not an imaginative construct. John notes the very time and place of its beginnings. It was here that the germ of the Apocalypse came to him, and it came through inspiration. A great deal of what he had to say would bear the mark of hard literary toil upon it, but as Scott puts it, John could "only feel that he was expanding and interpreting what had been thus given."[1]

Even before the Seer had seen any vision at all, the voice had spoken commanding him to transcribe what he was about to see

> in a book and send it to the seven churches: unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamum, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea.[2]

Even previously,[3] the command had been to write to the seven churches in Asia. So the destination of this Apocalypse is clearly stated. It is an encyclical addressed to the seven churches of Asia, which is part of the area known to us as Asia Minor. At the end of the first century, that peninsula was divided into six provinces, Asia, Bithynia, Galatia, Cappadocia, Cilicia, Lycia. Of these, Asia was the westernmost, fronting the Aegean Sea for the whole of its western frontier, bounded to the North by Bithynia, to the East by Galatia, to the South by Lycia. In the New Testament Asia is named by Luke,[4] by Paul,[5] by Peter,[6] and by John the Apocalyptist. All of these use the term in the familiar sense; i.e., that Asia is Proconsular Asia, constituted as above indicated. From the days of Lightfoot's dictum, "Asia in the New Testament is always Proconsular Asia,"[7] there has been no substantial difference of opinion at this point.

But if the geographical destination be clear, there is question about

1. Colossians 1:1, 2.

2. Colossians 4:13.

3. Acts 20:5 ff.

4. Ignatius, Ad. Magn. 11.

5. Ignatius, Ad. Trall. 1.

the specific locations to which the letters were addressed. John writes to the seven churches (ταῖς ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησίαις), as if these were the only churches to be found within the province. Such a conclusion is demonstrably erroneous. There were many more churches in Asia than these seven. Among them were Colossae,[1] Hierapolis,[2] Troas,[3] Magnesia,[4] and Tralles.[5] Moreover, some of these churches were in cities of considerable importance.

Why should we expect to find two comparatively unimportant towns, such as Philadelphia and Thyatira were, listed among the seven, while such communities as Colossae, Tralles, Hierapolis, Magnesia, Adramyttium, and others are passed by?

To these questions it is possible to give fairly satisfactory answers. That John was aware of the existence of more than the seven churches which he addresses within the province, we may be practically certain. The selection of seven of them was not intended to slight or overlook the others, but was in conformity with the general apocalyptic principle of the usage of numbers in a symbolical sense. To the end of conforming to the principle, he selected seven from among the churches of Asia which should stand, in his Apocalypse, in a representative capacity for all the churches. It is probable that he meant them to stand not alone for the churches of Asia, but for Christendom in general, wherever it was to be found at the close of the first century. At the same time, these churches were to be considered in the light of their own situations and circumstances. This double frame of reference will be dealt with somewhat more in detail below at the beginning of the chapter on the Letters to the Seven Churches.

Assuredly it is not an accident that the problems of these particular seven churches constitute a remarkable epitome of the fundamental problems of the Church in every part of it concerning which we know anything. To catalogue the virtues and vices of the Christians in Ephesus and Smyrna and Pergamum and Thyatira and Sardis and Philadelphia and Laodicea was substantially to catalogue the virtues and vices of Christians throughout the reaches to which the Gospel had been carried. In the mind of the Apocalyptist there seems to be a fluid kind of shift between the Church and the churches, between a consideration of the problems of the time as they affected all Christians, and as they affected the members of a local congregation in a city which he knew well. Clear delineation of these shifts of emphasis is not always possible. It is often an open question when the Seer is speaking specifically and when generically or typically. But that "the seven" should be written "The Seven" is as sure as need be.

Still there remains the matter of the specific churches which were chosen to represent the whole body of Christ. We have evidence why there were seven; we now ask, "Why <u>these</u> seven? The first three cities listed, Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum, were the chief communities of the province, and were connected by the road which the Romans built when first they moved into Asia. But after the messenger had carried the book from Ephesus to Smyrna and on to Pergamum, why should there have been a swing back to the inland cities of Thyatira, Sardis, and Philadelphia, with the last stop far down in Laodicea? Why should not the progress have been made forward to the great seaport town of Troas, for example?

The best answer seems to be that given by Ramsay:

1. "The Letters to the Seven Churches", p. 183.

2. "The Letters to the Seven Churches", p. 191, 192.

3. Revelation 1: 10, 11.

> Travelling and communication, of course, are inextricably involved in the road system: they are carried out, not along the shortest lines between the various points, but according to the roads that connect them. And all the seven Cities stand on the great circular road that bound together the most populous, wealthy, and influential part of the Province, the west-central region.[1]

> They were the best points on that circuit to serve as centres of communication with seven districts: Pergamum for the north (Troas, doubtless Adramyttium, and probably Cyzicus and other cities on the coast contained churches); Thyatira for an inland district on the north and north-east; Sardis for the wide middle valley of the Hermus; Philadelphia for Upper Lydia, to which it was the door (iii:8); Laodicea for the Lycus valley, and for central Phrygia, of which it was the Christian metropolis in later times; Ephesus for the Cayster and lower Maeander Valleys and coasts; Smyrna for the lower Hermus Valley and North Ionian coasts.[2]

When the Apocalypse had been sent to these seven centers, it would easily spread throughout their neighborhoods, and thence throughout the Province as a whole. Secondary road networks were based upon these towns, so that the circulation of the book, once it had been planted at churches in the Seven Cities, would be provided for through the entire region, and even without the borders of Asia. Having dealt with the problem of the destination of the Apocalypse, let us now turn our attention to the material of the vision of Christ which was vouchsafed to the Seer.

3

At the sound of the great voice, John turned to see who it was who spoke with him. What he saw was the vision of "one like unto a son of man," the Lord Christ Himself. This one is walking in the midst of seven golden candlesticks or lamp stands, which we are later told represent the churches. The churches are the Lord's first concern. His presence among them testifies to his abiding love for and interest in his people.

The description of Christ which follows is no more remarkable for the composite imagery which it contains than for the exceeding difficulty of drawing any sensible sort of picture from the vision. How shall we ex-

1. Kiddle, Martin, "The Revelation of St. John", pp. 13, 14.

2. Daniel 7:13.

plain the issuance of a voice like many waters from a mouth which held a two-edged sword? Or how picture the right hand which held seven stars aloft being laid simultaneously upon the prophet for his reassurance? These will perhaps seem like trivial and cavilling questions, but they indicate in some measure the problem of the interpretation of vision, a recurrent problem throughout this Apocalypse. Kiddle has a word at this point which is worthy of notice:

> it seems clear that John did not necessarily "see" the pictures which his words evoke, in any visual sense. Perhaps he would even have been distressed to think that any such misunderstanding could arise. He did actually fall into a trance. He did emerge from that trance with certain convictions burning in his heart. He did credit his clear vision of these truths to the inspiration of Christ. And then, how was he to convey his newly-sharpened perception of God's will to his fellow-Christians? Utterly convinced that God wished him to do so, he had yet to find words adequate for so difficult a task. His pen did not welcome abstractions, and yet some of the things he had to say were subtle, out of the reach of ordinary experience and ordinary words. And so the truths which he saw with a seer's keen and certain vision must resolve themselves into a pictured language which is often magnificent, occasionally incongruous.[1]

The imagery which John employs to describe the Christ is Old Testament imagery. No Jew would fail to understand the connections between the candlesticks representing the churches and the great seven-branched candlestick which had been one of the Temple's principal and most conspicuous symbols. Nor would he fail to read between the lines the message that while the candlestick of the temple now lay unlit and desolate in a Roman temple, the true community of the children of God was not unlit, but continued to shed abroad the light of the Gospel in the Churches. Merely to cite the other Old Testament connections of this symbolic language is impressive. "One like unto a son of man" refers back to Daniel.[2] The long garment is a reflection of priestliness or

1. Exodus 28:4, 31.

2. I Maccabbees 10:19.

3. Daniel 10:5.

4. Daniel 7:9.

5. Daniel 10:6.

6. Ezekiel 1:7.

7. Ezekiel 1:24.

8. Ezekiel 43:2.

9. Judges 5:31.

10. Kiddle, Martin, "The Revelation of St. John", p. 14.

royalty, or both.[1] The golden girdle is referred to in I Maccabees as part of the vesture of a king,[2] although the high-girded position of it here suggests a priest's garment.[3] The vision of the Ancient of Days is the source of the description of His head and hair as white as wool,[4] while the feet of burnished brass derive from Daniel,[5] and from Ezekiel.[6] The voice of many waters has clear connections with the passage in Ezekiel[7] where the noise of wings "like the noise of many waters" is also "The voice of the Almighty.[8] The song of Deborah concludes with the prayer that those who love Jehovah may be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might.[9]

Thus, to express the inexpressible, John falls back upon the imagery of his people, to present not so much a picture as an impression of extreme majesty, splendor, and glory.

> John was not primarily concerned with what we might term physical portraiture. He wished to say to the churches: "These are Christ's attributes. This is the character, and these the powers, of the Messiah to whose name we adhere."[10]

This statement of the character, functions, and authority of Jesus Christ is intended to form a prologue to the letters to the seven churches which follow immediately. To make his intention in this matter even more clear, the Apocalyptist prefaces each of the letters with a statement, selected from this full description, of those powers and attributes of Christ which are most peculiarly adapted to the needs of the church addressed.

After John's prostration at the sight of this overwhelming vision, he is bidden not to be afraid, but to observe closely what he will see thereafter, and to record it for the edification of the churches, which are identified now as the seven candlesticks, in whose midst the Christ

1. "Revelation", p. 134.

is walking. The seven stars in the right hand of the vision are declared to be the angels of the seven churches.

To the inevitable question, What means this term "angel", many answers have been given. Only two of them have enough support to force them upon our consideration. In the first place, it has been thought that the "angel" of a church represents the church's rulers, teachers, prebyters, or bishops. The bishop, being the temporal head of the church, would thus stand as its earthly representative. Against this interpretation C. A. Scott raises these trenchant criticisms:

> (1) the word "angel" is never used in the New Testament of a human being, except in two passages where it stands simply for "messenger"; (2) it is very unlikely that, at the date when the Apocalypse was written, the development from a plurality of presbyter-bishops in each congregation to a single monarchical bishop had taken place in Asia Minor. There was probably, therefore, up to this time no single individual who could properly be addressed as representing the local church, and (3) in the Letters themselves the "angel" is identified with his church as partaker of its character and its destiny to a degree beyond what could be ascribed to any human ruler.[1]

The second interpretation sees in the angel of each church a personification of its spirit or an ideal representation of its personality. Scott finds support for this view in the doctrine of guardian angels, which have influence over and responsibility for individuals, nations, etc. This is doubtful evidence, since Milligan unhesitatingly denies the presence of any proof that there was an early Christian approximation of that Jewish doctrine. But Scott's general contention, that the angel is the ideal spirit or personality of the church does not depend upon the "guardian angel" theory. He agrees with Milligan that

> the true idea seems to be that the "angels" of the churches are a symbolical representation in which the <u>active</u>, as distinguished from the passive, life of the Church finds expression. To St. John every person, every thing, has its

1. Milligan, William, "The Book of Revelation", pp. 25, 26.

2. "The Revelation of St. John", Vol. I, pp. 34, 35.

> angel. God proclaims and executes His will by angels (7:2, 14:6, 8, 9). The waters have an angel (16:5). Fire has an angel (14:18). The winds have an angel (7:1). The abyss has an angel (9:11). On all these occasions the "angel" is interposed when the persons or things spoken of are represented as coming out of themselves and as taking their part in intercourse or in action. In like manner the "angels of the churches" are the churches themselves, with this mark of distinction only, that, when they are thus spoken of, they are viewed not merely as in possession of inward vigour, but as exercising it towards things without.[1]

This interpretation looks in the direction of Platonic idealism, which was an active philosophical force in the world of the Apocalyptist, and in which every earthly thing was thought to have its heavenly counterpart, its ideal representation, of which it was but the specific and imperfect copy, but which it truly mirrored after the finite fashion of earth. Charles accepts this theory in general, but feels that it does not clear all of the difficulties from the way. In reality, he says,

> it amounts to explaining one symbol "the stars" by another symbol "the angels". Notwithstanding, we must hold fast to the interpretation in some form. Perhaps the seven stars represent in Semitic fashion the heavenly ideal of the Seven Churches: while the seven candlesticks are the actual realization of those ideals. ....Christ holds in His hand (i.e. His power) these ideals: that is, only through Him can they be realized.[2]

Hence, the weight of opinion, and the most convincing explanations of the matter, incline toward the view that we are to think of the stars, which are called the angels, as being personifications of the spirits of the churches, as the ideal manifestations of their characters.

This third section of the introductory chapter, the account of the commissioning vision, brings the chapter to a close. In the chapter the Apocalyptist has identified himself, and titled the book which he is sending to the Asian churches. He has greeted the people of those churches with characteristic salutation. And he has clearly set forth his reason

for writing to them, and indicated the divine source of his inspiration. He has, moreover, described the Christ, in whose name he writes, in terms which he proposes to employ later on in the second and third chapters.

At this point the Seer was prepared to begin the substance of the message, introduced by the letters to the Seven Churches which are to be found in the chapters which we are about to discuss.

CHAPTER THREE

THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

THE APOCALYPSE OF THE BLESSED APOSTLE JOHN

CHAPTERS TWO AND THREE

The New Testament in English
A New Translation, by Father Ronald A. Knox

To the angel of the church at Ephesus write thus: A message to thee from him who bears the seven stars in his right hand, and walks amidst the seven golden candlesticks: I know of all thy doings, all thy toil and endurance; how little patience thou hast with wickedness, how thou hast made trial of such as usurp the name of apostle, and found them false. Yes, thou endurest, and all thou hast borne for the love of my name has not made thee despair. Yet there is one charge I make against thee; of losing the charity that was thine at first. Remember the height from which thou hast fallen, and repent, and go back to the old ways; or else I will come to visit thee, and, when I find thee still unrepentant, will remove thy candlestick from its place. Yet this is in thy favour, thou dost abhor the ways of the Nicolaitans, as I, too, abhor them. Listen, you that have ears, to the message the Spirit has for the churches. Who wins the victory? I will give him fruit from the tree of life, which grows in the Paradise of my God.

And to the angel of the church at Smyrna write thus: A message to thee from him, who is before all and at the end of all, who underwent death and now is alive: I know how sorely tried thou art, how stricken with poverty (yet, all the while, so rich); how thy name is traduced by men who claim to be Jews (though they are no true Jews; they are rather the chosen people of Satan). Do not be afraid of the suffering thou art to undergo. Before long, the devil will throw some of you into prison, to have your faith tested there, and for ten days you shall be in sore distress. Keep faith with me to the point of death, and I will crown thee with life. Listen, you that have ears, to the message the Spirit has for the churches. Who wins the victory? The second death shall have no power to hurt him.

And to the angel of the church at Pergamum write thus: A message to thee from him whose sword is sharpened at both its edges: I know well in what a place thou dwellest, a place where Satan sits enthroned. And yet thou art true to my name, and hast not disowned thy faith in me. Such in former times was Antipas, who bore me faithful witness, and was put to death in Satan's dwelling-place, your city. Yet here and there I have fault to find with thee; thou hast followers there of the school of Balaam. It was Balaam who taught Balac how to lay a trap for the people of Israel, when they ate what was sacrificed to idols and fell into fornication; and thou, too, hast followers of the Nicolaitan school. Do thou, in thy turn, repent; or I will quickly come to visit thee, and fight against

them with the sword of my mouth. Listen, you that have ears, to the message the Spirit has for the churches. Who wins the victory? I will feed him with the hidden manna, and give him a white stone, on which stone a new name is written, known to him only who receives it.

And to the angel of the church at Thyatira write thus: A message to thee from the Son of God, who has eyes like flaming fire, and feet like orichalc: I know of all thy doings, thy faith, thy love, thy generosity, thy endurance, how in these last days thou art more active than at first. Yet here and there I have fault to find with thee; thou allowest the woman Jezebel, who claims the gift of prophecy, to mislead my servants with her teaching, so that they fall into fornication, and eat what is offered to idols. I have given her time for repentance, but she will not mend her harlot's ways. I have a bed ready to lay her in; and those who commit adultery with her will be in sore straits, if they do not repent of their wrong-doing. And her children I will kill outright, so that all the churches may know me for one who probes the innermost heart, and will repay each of you what his deeds have earned. But I say to you, those others in Thyatira who do not follow this teaching, who have never learned the deep mysteries (as they are called) which Satan offers; I have no fresh burden to lay upon you; keep hold of what is in your grasp already, until I come. Who wins the victory? Who will do my bidding to the last? I will give him authority over the nations; to herd them like sheep with a crook of iron, breaking them in pieces like earthenware; the same authority which I myself hold from my Father. And the Star of morning shall be his. Listen, you that have ears, to the message the Spirit has for the churches.

And to the church's angel at Sardis write thus: A message to thee from him who bears the seven spirits of God, and the seven stars. I know of all thy doings, how thou dost pass for a living man, and all the while art a corpse. Rouse thyself, and rally whatever else still lives, but lives at the point of death. There are tasks my God expects of thee, and I find them unfulfilled. Remember how the gift, how the message came to thee; hold it fast, and repent. If thou failest in thy watch, I will come upon thee like a thief; thou shalt never know the hour of my coming to thee. Yet here and there in Sardis thou canst claim souls which have kept their garments undefiled, and these shall bear me company, clothed in white; it is their due. Who wins the victory? So shall he be clothed, in white garments; his name I will never blot out of the book of life, his name I will acknowledge before my Father and his angels. Listen, you that have ears, to the message the Spirit has for the churches.

And to the angel of the church at Philadelphia write thus: A message to thee from him, who is all holiness and truth; who bears the key of David, so that none may shut when he opens, none open when he shuts: I know of thy doings, and see, I have set before thee an open door, there is no shutting it. I know how little thy strength is, and yet thou hast been true to my message, and hast not denied my name. Before long, I will give thee for thy own some of Satan's chosen people, the men who falsely claim to be Jews when they are none; before long, I will make them come to thee, doing reverence at thy feet, and acknowledging the love I have shewn for thee. Thou hast kept true to my lesson of endurance, and I will keep thee safe from the hour of trial which is soon to fall upon the whole world, for the testing of all who dwell on the earth. Patience, I am coming soon; hold what is in thy grasp, so that none may rob thee of thy crown. Who wins the victory? I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, never to leave it again. I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city my God has built, that new Jerusalem which my God is even now sending down from heaven, and my own new name. Listen, you that have ears, to the message the Spirit has for the churches.

And to the angel of the church at Laodicea write thus: A message to thee from the Truth, the faithful and unerring witness, the source from which God's creation began: I know of thy doings, and find thee neither cold nor hot; cold or hot, I would thou wert one or the other. Being what thou art, luke-warm, neither cold nor hot, thou wilt make me vomit thee out of my mouth. I am rich, thou sayest, I have come into my own; nothing, now, is wanting to me. And all the while, if thou didst but know it, it is thou who art wretched, thou who art to be pitied. Thou art a beggar, blind and naked; and my counsel to thee is, to come and buy from me what thou needest; gold, proved in the fire, to make thee rich, and white garments, to clothe thee, and cover up the nakedness which dishonours thee; rub salve, too, upon thy eyes, to restore them sight. It is those I love that I correct and chasten; kindle thy generosity, and repent. See where I stand at the door, knocking; if anyone listens to my voice and opens the door, I will come in to visit him, and take my supper with him, and he shall sup with me. Who wins the victory? I will let him share my throne with me; I too have won the victory, and now I sit sharing my Father's throne. Listen, you that have ears, to the message of the Spirit for the churches.

1. Revelation 1:11.

CHAPTER THREE

THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES
REVELATION TWO AND THREE

I

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

In these two chapters are to be found the letters to the seven churches to which John was commissioned to write.[1] These letters are of an intensely personal kind, dealing with matters of conduct and attitude within the churches as well as touching upon the external circumstances which were affecting the lives of the Christian groups in Asia.

Whereas in the later parts of the Apocalypse the struggle of the church with the powerful forces which were shaping the world of that day (especially the cult of Emperor worship and the pagan, immoral way of life typical of decadent Hellenism) in terms of highly figured symbolism and flamboyant imagery, in these chapters the struggle becomes almost prosaic in its pervasive character.

John sees the churches, and the Church, battling against odds which seem to be overwhelmingly unequal. But in the churches he sees a disposition to withstand the pressure of these strong forces. It is by no means a unanimous or universal disposition. In some parts of the kingdom there is apostasy. In others there is wavering. Scarcely a church is there which does not need to have its eyes opened to its danger, its conscience stirred by an appeal to be stedfast, in the face of all attack, to the gospel of the Lord Jesus.

It is his method of appeal to bring each church face to face with its own inner nature and ideal. It is to the "angel" of the church that the letter to each is addressed. Later on in the Apocalypse the Church is regarded:

1. Scott, Ernest Findlay, "The Book of Revelation", pp. 61, 62.

> simply as the Church, the people of Christ over against the heathen Empire. In these introductory chapters the Church is contrasted, not with the surrounding world, but with its own ideal. It must be a Church in reality as well as in name, or in the dreadful trial which is coming it will break down. These letters to the churches, in fact, supply the answer to an objection commonly brought against the book--that it is the product of early Christian bigotry and self-righteousness. For this writer, we are told, the Church alone has any claim in God's mercy; all within the Church are saints, and all outside of it are doomed to perdition. This may indeed appear to be the writer's attitude if we read his later chapters by themselves, but he has taken care to make clear at the outset that the mere name of Christian means nothing. The Church which Christ will deliver is made up of those who are truly His people. As He will destroy His enemies, He will also sift out His Church, and only to those who are found worthy will He give the crown of life.[1]

So, the appeal is not made only to the church as it finds itself in the midst of an historical situation, but to the church as it ought to be, the church as it is ideally constituted, the church which the mind of God envisions as the church-possible. John's writing to the churches, then, is to be considered in a double aspect: it is addressed to churches which are in an historical milieu, and it is addressed as well to the "ideal church" which is the goal, the basic meaning, the "angel" of each church. There is a clear and definite connection between the church at its best and its attitude toward the apostasy which is in the world, so that it is dangerously easy to take these twin emphases together, thus losing the subtle distinction between them. To maintain the distinction is to lend a richness and depth of conception to the Apocalypse which otherwise is lacking.

There is still another double aspect under which the letters must be considered. First, each epistle is addressed to a specific, individual, local congregation. The letters reflect the character of these churches unmistakably. They were well-known to the Seer, as their internal structure amply demonstrates. John knew the churches, and the cities in which they

1. Revelation 1:12 - 18.

2. The phrases do not all originate in the commissioning vision. Those addressed to Philadelphia (3:7b) and Laodicea (3:14b) do not refer to any part of that vision. The first, concerning the "key of David", comes from Isaiah 22:22, "And the key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder; and he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open." The latter, the phrase "the Amen" occurs in Isaiah 65: 16 where God is called "the God of Amen." The remainder of the description is derived from Revelation 1:5, where Jesus is called "the faithful witness" and finds its parallel in Colossians 1:15, 18, where He is designated "the firstborn of all creation."

were located, thoroughly. There is a personal and pastoral note pervading the letters which must have warmed the hearts of the people in those seven churches when they read the Apocalypse and learned how well the Apocalyptist remembered them and the special conditions which made life hard for each congregation of them. The graphic delineation and differentiation, which corresponds so closely with what is otherwise known of the character of each of these churches and their cities, has been remarked by many commentators.

Second, the letters when taken together, are directed to the churches at large. They are representative of the Church. The mixed nature of good and bad in these seven is typical of the mixed nature of Christendom in general. Seven individual churches are made to stand for the whole Church. There are several factors which lead inescapably to this conclusion. Not the least of these is the fact that in the Apocalypse the number seven is used continually to indicate completion, fullness, totality. As has been brought out above, it is proper to say that seven is not used as a number at all but as a symbol. That being true of the book as a whole, we should expect to find it true at this point. In the second place, each of the letters opens with a phrase describing Christ which pharases are largely taken directly from the vision of Christ which is recorded in the first chapter of the Apocalypse.[1] Each separate part refers back to that vision in its wholeness, which naturally suggests[2] the unity of the letters in which the phrases occur. Each letter likewise contains the phrase "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches." Two things are worthy of note at this point. One is that there is no qualification of those who shall hear. It is very general: "he that hath an ear", not seemingly limited to "Ephesians", or to "Smyrneans", etc. The other point is that "he that hath an ear" is enjoined to hear what is being said, not to one particular

1. Scott, C. A., "Revelation", p. 135.

2. "The Letters to the Seven Churches", p. 37.

3. "The Letters to the Seven Churches", p. 37.

4. "The Revelation of St. John", Volume I, p. 46.

church, but to "the churches." The message is apparently couched in terms which are applicable to one and to all at the same moment,

> at once seven epistles addressed to seven churches, and one Epistle addressed to the church; individual portraits of seven Christian communities, and one composite portrait of the whole; anticipations of the future of each, but also principles which must govern the fate of all.[1]

It follows unquestionably, if the letters were intended to be read under a double aspect, as individual and representative at one and the same time, that they never had any independent existence and circulation, as has been suggested by some scholars. They form an indissoluble part of the entire Apocalypse. We may be able to agree with Ramsay that "the Apocalypse would be quite complete without the Seven Letters: chapter iv. follows chapter i naturally"[2], but it is difficult to follow with him when he says,

> an Apocalypse could not content St. John: it did not bring him in close enough relation to his churches. And so, as a second thought, he addressed the Seven representative churches one by one; and as the letters could not be placed last, he placed them near the beginning.[3]

Still less satisfactory is the contention of Charles, that

> the Seven Letters were composed by our author before the time of Domitian: also that on their incorporation into the Apocalypse they were re-edited by him in order to adapt them to the impending crisis, by changes made in the beginnings to bring them into closer conformity with i:14 - 18, and....in order to link them up with the theme of the book as a whole....the conflict between Christ and Caesar, Christianity and the World Power, and the universal martyrdom of the faithful which the Seer apprehended as a result of this conflict.
>
> Now if the above conclusions are valid, it would not be unreasonable to conclude further that these Letters were actual letters sent separately to the various Churches, and are, notwithstanding their brevity, comparable in this respect to the Pauline Epp.[4]

These are highly ingenious suggestions, but ingenuity is not enough in matters of this sort. Charles, who in so many respects is the giant interpreter of the Apocalypse, seems to have fallen prey to speculation at this point, even heaping speculation upon speculation.

1. "The Revelation of St. John", p. 19.

2. "The Revelation of St. John", p. 19.

Much more congenial and acceptable is the view expressed by Kiddle:

> without question....if the letters were intended to form a sevenfold discourse, at once an analysis of the whole Church and a message to the whole Church, they could not at any time have had separate circulation, as has frequently been suggested. In any case, the full cogency of the letters so much depends on a knowledge and understanding of the later chapters of the book that we must regard them solely as a preface. For John, Revelation was more than a diocesan charge; it was a prophetic encyclical. No narrower view does justice to John's conviction of the overwhelming importance of his book to the Christian community. For the "hour of trial" which he foresaw was about to confront all Christians; the gathering up of the forces of evil was to be a universal menace; their final defeat was to be a prelude of Messiah's reign. John's canvas is as wide as the earth and heavens, and the events depicted on it are for the eyes of every believer.[1]

Does it follow, then, that the monumental work of Ramsay in reconstructing the life of the Seven Cities is to be disregarded in a study of the Letters? By no means, although Kiddle seems to give that impression:

> Our chief concern, therefore, in approaching the seven letters must not be to reconstruct the minutiae of local circumstance, but to appreciate the essential nature of the contribution made by each to John's sevenfold discourse.[2]

It is not a matter of disregarding local circumstance, or of assigning it a decisive place in the interpretation of the Seven Letters. For we must never forget that any study of these Letters must approach them under the dual aspect of a specific and a universal interpretation. The work of Ramsay is, therefore, very valid and valuable for an understanding of the Seven Cities, and their characteristic natures and circumstances. In the sections of this chapter which deal with the Seven Churches in turn, this will become evident.

As John looked out upon the churches, he observed that they displayed marked differences in their fitness to meet the stern tests of loyalty and stedfastness which lay ahead. Some were markedly healthy, in the Christian sense. Others were somewhat weakened by the presence among them of faith-

1. "The Epistles to the Seven Churches", pp. 93, 94.

2. "Kiddle, Martin, "The Revelation of St. John", p. 19.

less, disloyal, false persons, who claimed to be Christians, but who denied, in their lives or their teachings, or in both, the power of the gospel. Still other churches seemed to lack certain qualities without which they could hardly expect to withstand a severe persecution without becoming apostate from the Name and Cause of Christ.

Trench sums up this matter by saying,

> On comparing these Epistles one with another, we may observe that in two Churches, namely Smyrna and Philadelphia, the Great Shepherd and Bishop of souls finds matter only for praise; in two, Sardis and Laodicea, with very smallest exception in the former, only for rebuke. In three of the Churches, in Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira, the condition is a mixed one, so that with some things to praise, there are also some, more in one, fewer in another, to condemn. It will thus be perceived at once what far-looking provision is made in the selection of these particular Churches to be addressed, as in the scheme of the addresses to them, for the most varied instructions; for reproof, for praise, for reproof and praise mingled together and tempered by one another; for promises and threatenings.[1]

The Apocalyptist addresses the churches for whom he has but praise, i.e., the Philadelphian and Smyrnean churches, in the second and sixth letters of the series. Already tempered by persecution from the Jews, these two communities demonstrated not only their firmness and courage, but also their essential Christian virtue, which they possessed in good measure.

> Hence they had proved their fitness for the more intense ordeal still before them. These two letters must therefore be read together, as complementary addresses to all loyal Christians, warning them of a future ordeal, praising their past conduct, and encouraging them to renewed constancy by the assurance that their heavenly reward was secure, no matter what their Satanic opponents might do.[2]

The churches for which the Apocalyptist has virtually nothing but blame are those of Sardis and Laodicea, fifth and seventh of the series. These two churches were demonstrating none of the virtues of Christian life in their corporate existence. Sardis was, to all intents and pur-

1. Kiddle, Martin, "The Revelation of St. John", pp. 19, 20.

poses, a dead shell of a church. Only a very few of its members were true, and they were insufficient in number to affect the destiny of the church. Laodicea was a church in which the spirit of compromise, the lackadaisical attitude of lukewarmness had destroyed the zeal of the true Christian community. Dead and careless: these were the attributes of the Sardian and Laodicean churches, and through them the Apocalyptist spoke to all similar attitudes among Christians anywhere, warning them to repent, lest destruction should come upon them.

The churches of Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira are those for whom the Apocalyptist has mixed words of praise and blame. The Ephesians have a solid reputation for zealousness in orthodoxy and good works. False teachers found no solace within its circle of influence. But in its struggle with false teachers, perhaps because of its stern repudiation of Nicolaitanism, the church had lost the spirit of love which had once been a distinguishing characteristic. Orthodoxy had grown hard and cold. To Pergamum and Thyatira, John writes as to people who themselves are faithful, but who tolerate in their midst more or less influential groups who hold teachings which are in opposition to true Christian faith and practice. Tolerance of these immoral "Nicolaitans", or "Balaamites", or "Jezebelites" was

> at once an offense against the offenders, since it hindered repentance, and a danger to the churches, since tolerance of evil-doers might easily reduce the general abhorrence of the evil itself.[1]

Thus John warned against allowing too much zeal, or too little, to mar the life of the churches. Repentance for excesses and continuance in good works was necessary, he said, for spiritual health.

And thus John spoke to the condition of all the "Seven Churches", and

1. Revelation 2:1a; 8a, 12a, 18a; 3:1a, 7a, 14a.

2. Revelation 1:13.

through them to all the churches, warning of the danger of giving way to external pressures or to internal decay.

His warnings, recorded here in the second and third chapters of the Apocalypse, are among the most masterful productions of the New Testament. In their construction the letters show great evidence of balance and proportion. Set within a common form and pattern, they show subtle variations, ably and aptly designed to bring forth the emphasis and flavor of the word John had to speak to each of the churches. The design is meant to catch up in itself some hint of the nature of each city in the letter addressed to the church in that city. Thus, for example, references to raiment and to eyesalve in the letter to the Laodiceans, are reminders of the flourishing wool industry and medical school of that city. Further instances of this kind of reference will appear in the sections which deal individually with the letters.

There are in each letter some phrases which are constantly recurrent, others which are related to, but not identical with, phrases which are used elsewhere, and unique material which relates only to the church to which the letter was addressed.

Each letter opens with the command to write to the angel of the church, i.e., to the "church ideal" within the actual body of Christian believers. The phrase is identical in each case: "To the angel of the church in.... write."[1]

This command is followed by an identification of Him who speaks to the church by citing one aspect of His nature and power, the descriptions being taken, in general, from the vision of Christ which John saw at the time of his commission as a Seer.[2] These designations are as follows:

1. Revelation 2:1b.

2. Revelation 2:8b.

3. Revelation 2:12b.

4. Revelation 2:18b.

5. Revelation 3:1b.

6. Revelation 3:7b.

7. Revelation 3:14b.

8. Revelation 3:1.

9. Revelation 1:20.

10. Revelation 3:7b.

To Ephesus[1]: "he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, he that walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks."

To Smyrna[2]: "the first and the last, who was dead, and lived again."

To Pergamum[3]: "he that hath the sharp two-edged sword."

To Thyatira[4]: "the Son of God, who hath his eyes like a flame of fire, and his feet are like unto burnished brass."

To Sardis[5]: "he that hath the seven spirits of God, and the seven stars."

To Philadelphia[6]: "he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth and none shall shut, and that shutteth and none openeth."

To Laodicea[7]: "the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God."

A comparison of these excerpts with the commissioning vision which John records in 1:11-20, reveals that the first five of them are derived from that vision, almost always in exact accord with the terms of the vision. The only phrase which includes a term which has no counterpart in the vision is that addressed to Sardis; i.e., "the seven spirits of God."[8] It is, however, possible to think that the phrase "seven spirits" constitute a reference to the statement "the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches,"[9] thus "spirit" would be equated with "angel", which would be in harmony with our opinion that the angel represented the ideal nature of the church.

However, the last two excerpts, addressed to Philadelphia and to Laodicea, do not make use of the attributes of Christ in the commissioning vision. In the letter to Philadelphia, Christ is characterized as "he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the keys of David, he that openeth and none shall shut, and that shutteth and none openeth."[10] In the vision, it is the "keys of death and of Hades" which Jesus represents Himself as

1. Revelation 1:5.

2. Revelation 1:5.

3. Revelation 3:14b.

4. Revelation 1:17.

5. See note above, p. 63.

6. Revelation 2:2, 3.

7. Revelation 2:9.

having. The thought is clearly parallel, the language is not, that of the epistle to Philadelphia being derived from Isaiah 22:22, rather than from Revelation 1:18. The phrase, "he that is holy, he that is true", shows a clear parallelism with a phrase from the salutation to the Apocalypse:[1] "Jesus Christ, the faithful witness."

This same verse of the saluation,[2] finds another parallel in the Epistle to Laodicea, which characterizes Jesus as "the Amen, the faithful and true witness."

The final variant, and the one least clearly implied or paraphrased elsewhere in the opening chapters of the Apocalypse is the phrase "the beginning of the creation of God" which is addressed to Laodicea.[3] Only in the words "the first and the last"[4] does anything like a similar idea occur in the salutation or in the vision of chapter one.[5] But with these few and unimportant exceptions, the language of description at the opening of each letter corresponds exactly to the Seer's vision of Christ which resulted in the commissioning of the Apocalypse.

It may be observed next that the churches are, in turn, addressed in a clause beginning, "I know" οἶδα .

To Ephesus Christ is represented as saying,[6]

> I know thy works, and thy toil and patience, and that thou canst not bear evil men, but didst try them that call themselves apostles, and they are not, and didst find them false; and thou hast patience and didst bear for my name's sake, and hast not grown weary. But I have this against thee, that thou didst leave thy first love.

To Smyrna He says,[7]

> I know thy tribulation, and thy poverty (but thou art rich), and the blasphemy of them that say they are Jews, and they are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

1. Revelation 2:13 - 15.

2. Revelation 2:19, 20.

3. Revelation 3:1.

4. Revelation 3:8.

5. Revelation 3:15, 16.

1

To Pergamum His word is,

> I know where thou dwellest, even where Satan's throne is; and thou holdest fast my name, and didst not deny my faith, even in the days of Antipas my witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwelleth. But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there some that hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumbling-block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also some that hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans in like manner.

2

To Thyatira He states,

> I know thy works, and thy love and faith and ministry and patience, and that thy last works are more than the first. But I have this against thee, that thou sufferest the woman Jezebel, who calleth herself a prophetess; and she teacheth and seduceth my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed to idols.

3

To Sardis He says,

> I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and thou art dead.

4

To Philadelphia, He says,

> I know thy works (behold, I have set before thee a door opened, which none can shut), that thou hast a little power, and didst keep my word, and didst not deny my name.

5

To Laodicea His word,

> I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would that thou wert cold or hot. So because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth.

These characterizations reveal the essential nature of each church. What is good and bad in the life of the several communities is clearly delineated. It is a mixed picture, as would be the characterization of every church in every time. So, after stating the condition of the church, John moves immediately into an exhortation based upon the weakness of the church, and designed to correct it.

1. Revelation 2:5.

2. Revelation 2:10.

3. Revelation 2:16.

4. Revelation 2:22 - 25.

5. Revelation 3:2 - 4.

6. Revelation 3:9 - 11.

1

To Ephesus, His word is,

> Remember, therefore, whence thou art fallen, and repent and do the first works; or else I come to thee, and will move thy candlestick out of its place, except thou repent.

2

To Smyrna, He says,

> Fear not the things which thou art about to suffer: behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days. Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life.

3

To Pergamum, He commands,

> Repent therefore; or else I come to thee quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of my mouth.

4

To Thyatira, He states,

> Behold, I cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of her works. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he that searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto each one of you according to your works. But to you I say, to the rest that are in Thyatira, as many as have not this teaching, who know not the deep things of Satan, as they are wont to say; I cast upon you none other burden Nevertheless that which ye have, hold fast till I come.

5

To Sardis, His word is,

> Be thou watchful, and establish the things that remain, which were ready to die: for I have found no works of thine perfected before my God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and didst hear; and keep it and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. But thou hast a few names in Sardis that did not defile their garments: and they shall walk with me in white; for they are worthy.

6

To Philadelphia, He says,

> Behold, I give of the synagogue of Satan, of them that say they are Jews, and they are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee. Because thou didst keep the work of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of trial, that hour which is to come upon the whole world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. I come quickly: hold fast that which thou hast, that no one take thy crown.

1. Revelation 3:17 - 20.

To Laodicea, He says,[1]

> Because thou sayest, I am rich, and have gotten riches, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art the wretched one and miserable and poor and blind and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold refined by fire, that thou mayest become rich; and white garments, that thou mayest clothe thyself, and that the shame of thy nakedness be not manifest; and eyesalve to anoint thine eyes, that thou mayest see. As many as I love, I reprove and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.

These exhortations gain in force when we remember the picture of Christ walking up and down in the midst of the churches, which is part of the commissioning vision described in the first chapter. His presence among the churches in itself constitutes a kind of judgment. Measured against His perfect life and character, the works of the churches appear in their true colors and dimensions. Alongside that ultimate and heavenly standard their deeds are revealed to be worthy or unworthy. Likewise the presence of Christ, immanent with the churches, makes Him instantly available to punish or reward. The judgment of sin does not wait wholly until the final judgment. Sin contains within itself the principle of evil, which is self-destructive, and which, when viewed against any higher standard than that of comparison with the ordinary, common level of life, is seen to be less than the best, hence the enemy of the best. Measured against common standards, sin may masquerade for a time, disguising its true nature. But when viewed alongside the eternal Christ, it is immediately exposed for what it is, and judged wanting by the fact of disclosure.

But even though the exhortations are pointed and stern, even though threat of punishment is part of them, their culmination is never to be found in denunciation, but in encouragement. Each letter contains a promise to "the one who overcometh" (ὁ νικῶν). The terms of the promises vary

1. Revelation 2:7.

2. Revelation 2:11.

3. Revelation 2:17.

4. Revelation 2:26 - 28.

5. Revelation 3:5.

6. Revelation 3:12.

7. Revelation 3:21.

from church to church, in accordance with the needs and situations of each congregation. Thus the promise is made to the Ephesians: "To him that overcometh, to him will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God."[1] The Smyrneans are promised that "He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death."[2] "To him that overcometh, to him will I give of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and upon the stone a new name written, which no one knoweth but he that receiveth it"[3], is the promise to the Pergamenians. The Thyatirans are encouraged by the words: "And he that overcometh, and he that keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give authority over the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to shivers; as I also have received of my Father: and I will give him the morning star."[4] The faithful among the Sardians receive the promise that: "He that overcometh shall thus be arrayed in white garments; and I will in no wise blot his name out of the book of life, and I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels."[5] To the Philadelphians, it is promised that "He that overcometh, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go out thence no more: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God, and mine own new name."[6] Finally, even the Laodiceans are promised that "He that overcometh, I will give to him to sit down with me in my throne, as I also overcame, and sat down with my Father in his throne."[7]

Kiddle strongly insists that these pointed references to the one who overcomes must be interpreted to indicate martyrdom.

> We must be quite clear about the meaning of the word conqueror. The term has a twofold significance. First, the conqueror must vanquish the temptations of this life, and demon-

1. "The Revelation of St. John", pp. 61 - 63.

> strate in action his possession of the Christian virtues. This idea is implicit in all the promises to the conqueror. It is a necessary qualification of the second meaning of "conqueror"....that is, he who wins a victory over persecution and death, the martyr. ....Not all of the seven promises, taken individually, require us to think of the conqueror as the martyr. For example, at the day of Judgment (from which the martyrs are excluded by virtue of their proved worthiness, cf. xx. 5 - 6) all whose names are found in the book of Life are admitted to the heavenly city, and to the "Paradise of God", where they may enjoy fruit from the tree of Life (ii. 7 and xxii. 2). The book of Life, as we see from the great Judgment scene, is by no means written only with the blood of the martyrs; the names of all faithful Christians are there, all the righteous, pure, and true (cf. xxi. 27). And these men will escape the second death (ii. 11 and xx. 15), to form the blessed community which is to have intimate fellowship with Christ (ii. 28, iii. 12, and xxi. 2) no less than the martyrs themselves. Why, then, are these particular promises made to the martyr-conqueror, if they do not apply exclusively to him? Their true significance is that the conqueror is certain of immortality, and of the bliss, security, privilege, and the like which the faithful are to enjoy. He has been fully proved; ....In two of the promises, however--those to Laodicea and Thyatira--the conqueror can be only the martyr: if in two, then in all. For John tells us in chap. xx. that the privilege of sharing Christ's power (iii. 21) in his reign on earth over the pagan nations (ii. 26 - 28) belongs only to the martyrs who "came to life and reigned along with Christ for a thousand years," after the defeat of the Satanic powers at the great battle of Harmagedon.[1]

There is a good bit to be said for that point of view. The notion developed in the early church that martyrdom was, in a way, the perfect fulfilment of the Christian life, the crowning testimony to a hostile, pagan world of a faith in Christ which was strong enough to defy that world even to death. The word μαρτυς itself, originally signifying a witness, one who testified, came, with the spread of persecution to be used in a special and limited sense to designate those who died as a result of persecution. Thus the word passed, by transliteration, into our tongue as the word "martyr", which signifies for us still one who dies for his dearest cause.

But it seems to the writer to be strongly open to question whether this Apocalyptist intended quite that much freight to be attached to the phrase ὁ νικῶν . The intent seems to be the exhortation of people to resist pressures which are dangerous, of course, and which may result in persecution and discomfort and social ostracism, but which have not yet mounted to the degree of strength which would result in death. Death is in the offing, disaster is surely coming. The Apocalyptist is sure of that. But he is exhorting the Christians to cut themselves off from all temptation, to stand fast in the Lord now, while it is yet possible and relatively easy, against the great blasphemy and persecution which is on its way. To narrow down the phrase ὁ νικῶν until it embraces only the martyr seems to do violence to the book. The Christians are encouraged to be faithful even if it means death. But "overcoming" does not yet seem to mean inescapable death.

The quotation given above, from Kiddle, demonstrates an interesting fact: many of the promises are couched in terms which recur later on in the Apocalypse. One of two inferences may be drawn from this fact: (1) that the schemata of the whole book lay clearly in the author's mind at the outset, so that as he writes in the early chapters he is anticipating what he is going to say in some later portion, or (2) that the letters were written at a later time and interpolated in the letters after the later chapters had come to completion.

The second of these inferences seems, at first glance, to favor the theory of Charles, that the letters as a whole were edited from some earlier circulating material, and included in the Apocalypse. But a little reflection, and reference to the section quoted above from Kiddle, will show that this is by no means the case. There is a very real continuity

of design between the letters to the Seven Churches and later sections of the Apocalypse. If they were included from an earlier circulation, which the writer does not believe, they were fitted with the most extreme care into the structure of the present Apocalypse.

Whatever decision may be made about the time of writing of these promises, or indeed of any portion of the Seven Letters (and, for purposes of this study, such decision is largely irrelevant), the fact remains that they highlight for us the extreme care and precision of literary composition of this book. As we commonly interpret "vision", this production simply does not partake of its nature, in the general, over-all impression. This leads us to conclude that, on the whole, the former inference is more probably, viz. that the pattern of the Apocalypse was well established in John's mind, and that it is a coherent literary work, which makes sense when it is analyzed as a unity, and which does not require any full-blown and fine-drawn theories of piece-work and redaction to explain its meaning.

To continue with the sectional analysis of the Epistles, we discover that toward its close, each letter contains the solemn exhortation "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches."

There is, however, a difference in construction, at this point. In the letters to three churches (Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamum, the first three of the series), the exhortation to hear precedes the promise, while in four (Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea, the last four of the series), it follows the promise, forming the concluding clause of the letters. It is possible that this distinction is connected in the mind of the writer with a distinction between two groups of churches, the first three and the last four. So concludes C. A. A. Scott, who remarks that "there is a difference in tone between these two groups which it is easier to feel

1. "Revelation", p. 136.

2. "The Book of Revelation", pp. 36 ff.

than to describe."[1]

But Milligan makes a great deal of the distinction, theorizing about it in this fashion:

> it is impossible not to see that the first three epistles and likewise the last four, to whatever extent they form parts of one whole, constitute in each case a special unity. What is the ground of distinction? ....There are two aspects of the Church which may be said to pervade the whole Apocalypse: first, as she is in herself, in her own true nature; and secondly, as she is engaged in, and affected by, a struggle with the world. The distinction between the two may be traced in the grouping of which we speak. The first three epistles lead us to the thought of the Church in the former, the remaining four to the thought of her in the latter, aspect. In the first three she is the pure bride of Christ; in the last four she has yielded to the influences of the world, and the faithful remnant within her is separated from her professing but unfaithful members. .... Such seems to be the relation to one another of the two groups into which the seven epistles naturally divide themselves. In the first group, the church has stood firm against the world. She is full of toil and endurance; in her poverty she is rich; and the troubles of the future she does not fear. She holds fast the name of Christ, and openly confesses Him. Seeds of evil are indeed within her, which will too soon develop themselves; but she has the Divine life within her in as much perfection as can be expected amidst the infirmities of our present state. She walks with God and hears His voice in her earthly paradise. In the second group the evil seed sown by the enemy has sprung up. The Church tolerates the sins that are around her, makes her league with the world, and yields to its influence. She rallies indeed at times to her new and higher life, but she finally submits to the world and is satisfied with its goods. There are many faithful ones, it is true, in her midst. ....Yet they are the smaller portion of her members, and they shall eventually come forth out of her.[2]

This is an interesting thesis, but there are discrepancies in the internal evidence which make it hard to give too much credence to Milligan. The letter to the church at Philadelphia, with its tone of unmixed praise for fidelity in the midst of a most difficult situation, is one of the last four which, in Milligan's phrase, "have made their league with the world." The Ephesians, who have "left their first love", are among the

1. "Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Revelation of John", pp. 129, 130.

first three, in which the church appears, to quote Milligan, as the "pure bride of Christ." The sin of lovelessness, among commentators generally seems to have been rather lightly passed over, but surely it is of major importance, and a blight upon the church which exhibits it. There may be a division in John's mind which he indicates by placement of the phrase about hearing, but it is far from clear what the distinction was. Dusterdieck succinctly observes that

> the number seven seems intentionally resolved into three and four, as also elsewhere, although no consequence dare be inferred therefrom concerning the relation of the churches to each other.[1]

Summing up the analysis of the letters to the seven churches, we may list these component parts:

1. The phrase, "these things saith".
2. Description of Christ, the Speaker, usually in terms of the commissioning vision.
3. Characterization of the church in a statement beginning "I know", which is concerned with the good aspects of the church's life.
4. Development into an exhortation either to repentance or to stedfastness, in which any faults of the church are catalogued.
5. Promise to "him that overcometh", which occurs in this position in the last four epistles, and in the final position in the first three.
6. The phrase, "he that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches", which occurs in this position in the last four letters, and in the penultimate position in the first three.

These letters provide for us, as they were intended to do for the people to whom John wrote, a rather explicit inventory of the churches. Here, in the compass of two chapters of his Apocalypse, the Seer sets forth the virtues and vices, the strengths and weaknesses, the mixed qualities and characteristics of the seven churches.

1. Revelation 2:1-7.

2. Cf. Acts 19:23 ff.

3. The term νεωκόρος indicates, in general, one who has charge of a temple. As applied to cities it conveys the idea of having dedicated a temple to some deity. References to the term or to its nominal derivatives Neokorate and Neokaisereia in this discussion mean that a temple to the Emperor was in the city designated.

II

THE MATERIAL OF THE SEVEN LETTERS

The preceding general considerations of the second and third chapters of the Apocalypse have now prepared us for a discussion of those chapters in an orderly fashion. The remainder of this chapter will be occupied with the actual material and bearing of each of the seven letters, in turn.

A. THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS
Revelation 2:1 - 7

> To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, he that walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks: I know thy works, and thy toil and patience, and that thou canst not bear evil men, and didst try them that call themselves apostles, and they are not, and didst find them false; and thou hast patience and didst bear for my name's sake, and hast not grown weary. But I have this against thee, that thou didst leave thy first love. Remember therefore whence thou art fallen, and repent and do the first works; or else I come to thee, and will move thy candlestick out of its place, except thou repent. But this thou hast, that thou hatest the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches. To him that overcometh, to him will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God.[1]

This city was the capital of the Roman proconsular province of Asia, and its greatest metropolis. In many inscriptions it is designated as (ἡ πρώτη καὶ μεγίστη μητρόπολις τῆς Ἀσίας). Its greatness arose from its favored geographical position on the sea-coast at the end of the principal trade routes through Asia Minor from east to west. Religiously, its importance derived from the great temple of Diana (Artemis), which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.[2] The city appropriated to itself the title, Temple Warden to Diana (νεωκόρος, Acts 19:35),[3] and was inordinately proud of the beauty and eminence of its temple. Paul's difficulties in Ephesus arose through the machinations of the guild of sil-

1. Acts 19:23 ff.

2. Acts. 20:31.

3. Acts 18:19.

4. I Timothy 1:3.

5. Acts 18:24, 26; Ephesians 6:21.

versmiths and their leader Demetrius, when the Christian teaching began to make serious inroads into the business of making and selling replicas of Diana and her temple.[1] Moreover, Ephesus was a center of emperor worship, possessing at least one temple of the cult. The word νεωκόρος came to be applied to the city rather in terms of its relation to the imperial cultus than of its devotion to Diana.

In addition to being a center of pagan worship, Ephesus was also a hotbed of magic, cult, and superstition. Its works on magic were notorious throughout the world, and under the influence of the Apostle Paul, almost ten thousand dollars' worth of them were burned in the public square, adding thus the enmity of the magicians to the hostility which Paul faced in the city.

The influence of this great city, both as a base of operations and a center for the spread of the gospel was not lost on Paul, who spent a considerable amount of time (more than two years) in Ephesus, first preaching in the synagogue, and then for two years in the lecture rooms of Tyrannus.[2] He himself indicates the period as of three years duration. The inauguration of Christianity in Ephesus might be ascribed to Priscilla and Aquila, whom Paul is reported to have left in the city upon his first hurried visit to the place.[3] (He appointed Timothy to "tarry at Ephesus, when I was going into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge certain men not to teach a different doctrine.[4]) Apollos and Tychicus also contributed to the building up of the church there.[5] Early tradition has it that Timothy, John, and the Virgin Mary were all buried at Ephesus. It seems clear that some "John", be it the Apostle, Elder, or some other, exercised considerable influence over the churches of the whole province of Asia from the closing years of the first century. This is probably, but by no means certainly, the John of the Apocalypse.

1. Swete, Henry B., "The Apocalypse of St. John", pp. lxix, lxx.

2. Acts 20:17 - 38.

3. I Timothy 1:7.

4. I Timothy 4:1 - 3.

5. Ad. Ephes., 7:1.

If the Epistle to the Ephesians of St. Paul be regarded as a sort of circular letter to the churches of Asia, it reflects interestingly the religious situation, somewhere around the year 60, of the churches to which John writes in the Apocalypse:

> From this point of view it is interesting to note the repeated reference in this Epistle to a charismatic ministry (Eph. ii. 20, iv. 11 f.); the stress laid on the reconciliation of the Jew and Gentile in Christ (ii. 11 ff.); the conception of the Christian life as found up with the risen and ascended life of the Lord, and working itself out into a life of actual participation in His glory (ii. 6 ff.) ....ideas which reappear in the Apocalypse of John.[1]

To judge from Paul's parting address to the elders of the church,[2] the word of the Gospel struck deep into the Ephesian soil, and bore good fruits of faith and love. This impression is borne out by the tone of the letter which is now under consideration.

That Judaizing and Gnostic teachers were at work in Ephesus may be inferred from I Timothy, which seems to imply that there were such in that city, who were

> desiring to be teachers of the law, though they understand neither what they say, nor whereof they confidently affirm.[3]

> But the Spirit saith expressly, that in later times some shall fall away from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of demons, through the hypocrisy of men that speak lies, branded in their own conscience as with a hot iron; forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by them that believe and know the truth.[4]

And in the same connection, Ignatius may be cited. He employs terms which may be inferred to refer to them:

> For some most worthless persons are in the habit of carrying about the name (of Jesus Christ) in wicked guile, while yet they practice things unworthy of God, and hold opinions contrary to the doctrine of Christ, to their own destruction, and that of those who give credit to them, whom ye must avoid as ye would wild beasts.[5]

1. Or it may be that the "test" which is here spoken of is that which the Didache proposes, i.e., that every apostle should be received as the Lord, but if his visit is prolonged beyond a single day, or at most two days, he is to be regarded as an imposter. Did. 11:4 f.

2. Ad. Ephes., 9:1.

The danger of schism, and of falling into the traps set by false teachers of false doctrine, is thus evident.

As John addresses the church in this city, he writes in the name of the One who holds in His grasp the seven stars, and walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks. That is to say, Christ is in the midst of the churches (represented by the candlesticks) as they are and bears among them the ideal of the churches as they ought ideally to be (represented by the seven stars in His hand).

The first words of the epistle are encouraging. The Ephesians are to be commended for what they have accomplished, and for their toil and stedfastness. Surrounded by false teachers, they have learned discrimination, and have put doctrine to the test.[1] Thus they have discovered for themselves the presence of faithless teachers and false prophets among them. The outcome for the church was a watchful temper, an alert orthodoxy, a constant vigilance against the corruptions of the pure gospel which might at any time be put forward by some teacher to deceive the people. Paul's long sojourn among them had given them a firm foundation in the heart of the gospel truth, which they did not propose to see vitiated.

This determination of the church to detect and expose false teachers is illustrated in the letter of Ignatius to Ephesus:

> I have learned that certain persons passed through you from yonder, bringing evil doctrine; whom ye suffered not to sow seed in you, for ye stopped your ears, so that ye might not receive the seed sown by them.[2]

Such intransigent determination to keep itself "unspotted from the world" must have cost the Ephesian church dearly in terms of its relationship with the pagan community. Perhaps it is for this reason that it is so highly praised for patient endurance. It cannot have been comfortable to be a Christian at Ephesus, yet in the face of all difficulties,

the church had remained true to the central faith of the gospel.

But so great zeal has also its dangers, dramatically summed up in the stern warning which the Apocalyptist addressed to the church. Recover the love for God and for your fellows which you have lost, he exhorted, or you will cease to exist as a church at all. Remember the warmth of love which used to move you, and return to it. It is imperative, lest your "candlestick" shall be "removed from its place."

The commentators cannot agree about this love, whether it was to be thought of as love to God (so C. A. Scott, et al.) or brotherly love (Kiddle, et al.). The confusion seems needless. What is more likely than that the hard censoriousness of the typical zealot should reduce the sympathy, understanding, and affection with which the Ephesian Christians regarded one another, and that this attitude toward each other should in turn reduce the love and esteem in which God was held? The temperament and activity alike of the zealot tend to shrink love to a side issue. Correctness is what counts. Assuredly it was what counted at Ephesus.

The tragedy of Ephesus was that in their justifiable and worthy eagerness to root out heresy, the result was the rooting out of love, as well. And love is a flower which must bloom in the garden of the Christian church if it is to call itself a church at all. Harshness of temper, Pharisaical certainty of one's own righteousness, the primary importance of being right, hardness and inflexibility of nature, these all marred the Ephesian fellowship, which had "left its first love."

The remedy which the Apocalyptist recommended to the church was simplicity itself: "Remember therefore whence thou art fallen, and repent and do the first works." Just recall how things used to be among you and return to your first works. That is what is necessary. The "first love", which has been lost, must be recaptured. Love must reign among the members

1. Kiddle, Martin, "The Revelation of St. John", p. 24.

2. Acts 20:29, 30.

3. "The Revelation of St. John", p. 24.

and must be displayed toward God.

This remedy, though simple, is urgent and necessary. The alternative is the discontinuance of Christian life as the Ephesians have known it: "I come to thee, and will move thy candlestick out of its place."

> The threat is vague: either the community will cease to exist as the earthly agent of the Messiah, or (more probably) it will be disowned, and hence lose the privilege of protection in the last days, to perish in the general cataclysm. But little depends on the alternative. The essential truth is that mistrust, quarrelsomeness, groundless suspicion, coldness of heart, and malice--in short, lack of love--must lead to spiritual death.[1]

John is solemn about it: repentance or removal of the candlestick. The alternative is clear-cut and definite. The prophecy of St. Paul is fulfilled in the church of Ephesus:

> fierce wolves will enter in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.[2]

Says Kiddle,

> These men had appeared, and the work of detecting and exposing them can have been carried on only at a great cost. An inquisitorial spirit must necessarily rob affection of its spontaneity, and reduce the forbearance and trust so necessary to the life of a small community. The condition of the church at Ephesus--and it can hardly have been unique--startlingly substantiates the prophecy of St. Matt. xxiv. 11: "many false prophets will rise and mislead many. And in most of you love will grow cold by the increase of iniquity." It was for that very reason that love had "grown cold" at Ephesus.[3]

With things in so bad a state, it was imperative for the Ephesians to face up squarely to their condition, for they were about to lose their distinctive Christian quality. Kiddle believes that the supreme importance of this warning is the reason for the primary place of the letter to Ephesus in the series of seven,

1. : "The Revelation of St. John", p. 21.

2. Alford, Henry, "The Greek Testament", Volume IV, p. 563.

3. Revelation 2:6.

4. Revelation 2:15.

> and this consideration also decided the emphatic final position of the Laodicean letter. First and last, as it were, the churches must guard against losing the essential qualities of their faith: love and a fervent, unpresuming devotion.[1]

This seems to be a somewhat homiletical treatment of the issue, and not convincing alongside the prevailing view that the Ephesian letter is the first because of the position which the city of Ephesus occupied in the life of Asia, and the added consideration that Ephesus would be the first city to which the Apocalypse would be taken, upon its arrival by boat from Patmos.

The love which is enjoined upon the Ephesians is not to be mistaken by them for a form of sentimental amiability. John makes it quite clear that they were right in exercising discrimination. The evil men whom they refused to tolerate should not have been tolerated. The repudiation of the Nicolaitans was a deed of which the church at Ephesus might well be proud. Its stand against false teachers and their doctrine was highly creditable. Its only blame lay in its forgetfulness of kindness and love. So,

> we may notice the tender compassion of our blessed Lord, who, in his blame of a falling church, yet selects for praise one particular in which His mind is yet retained.[2]

So far as its repudiation of the Nicolaitans is concerned, the church at Ephesus had been doing the will of the Lord, for He hated their works of iniquity with a holy hatred. Unfortunately, just what those works were we are in no position to say with certainty. The "Nicolaitans" must remain in a haze of mystery.[3] Only here, in the letter to the Ephesians, and in the letter to the Pergamenians,[4] are they mentioned in the literature of the New Testament. In this present letter, nothing at all is cited of the nature of their works, save only that the Ephesians, in imitation of their Lord, hated them. The letter to Pergamum describes

1. Revelation 2:14.

2. Revelation 2:20, 24.

3. Revelation 3:4.

the doctrines of the Nicolaitans as being held in "like manner" as the doctrines of Balaam, who taught Balak how to make the children of Israel sin, "to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication." Whatever we can say about the Nicolaitans depends upon these brief notices as primary material. It is assuredly not sufficient to establish a solid case, or to leave room for dogmatism.

The additional information gleaned from the letter to Pergamum does, however, seem to indicate that these doctrines were of an Antinomian character. One of the fundamental concerns of John, as he wrote to the seven churches, was related to the presence among some of them, and quite likely all of them, of a distinctly Antinomian type of thought. Whereas in the Ephesian and Pergamenian letters these Antinomians are designated as Nicolaitans, in others of the Letters to the Seven Churches they are otherwise described. "Some that hold the teaching of Balaam" is the descriptive phrase in the letter to the Pergamenians.[1] In Thyatira the lawless ones are followers of the Jezebel-prophetess, who teaches them the deep things of Satan, to "commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed to idols".[2] In the Sardian letter, the reference to those who "did not defile their garments"[3] seems to contrast these faithful ones with others who did so defile their garments, i.e., who lived lives of impurity and shame.

It seems clear that Antinomian thought was so well established that it had passed from being merely a speculative philosophy into the realm of action, so that the lives of the Christians were being, in varying degrees, besmirched by impurity and evil based upon Antinomian doctrines.

These Antinomians (ἀντί - against, νόμος - law) professed to believe that, under the gospel dispensation, the moral law is of no use or

1. Simcox, W. H., "The Revelation of St. John", p. 152.

2. Adv. Haer., 3:11.

obligation, on the ground that faith alone is necessary to salvation. This belief stemmed from one or the other of two sources. On the one hand, there is the possibility that a perverted and exaggerated Paulinism may have pressed Paul's great principle of freedom from the law of the flesh through the grace of Christ to the absurdity of an assertion "of the indifference of the spiritual, of all outward actions."[1]

On the other hand, the position may have grown out of a syncretistic adoption of an oriental dualism, which regards the flesh as essentially sinful, and assumes a false dichotomy of flesh and spirit, in which the spirit is considered to exist apart from, and in distinction to, the flesh, so that the deeds of the flesh have no effect upon the life and purity of the spirit. It is self-evident that such a philosophical belief, for whatever reason, would result in conduct without regard for moral standards, and directly flouting the high Christian morality and ethic of Jesus and His apostles. Herein lay the pressing danger to Christianity.

Upon either hypothesis of the origin of the teaching, it seems probable that these Antinomians were men of erudition and philosophic insight. They were not licentious for the sake of licentiousness, out of lust alone. They had a basic system of ideas underlying their conduct. Irenaeus reported later of them that they taught the Cerinthian doctrines of a demiurge and of a docetic incarnation before Cerinthus himself.[2] That is to say, they were thoroughgoing dualists on a philosophical and theological level.

The greatest danger in which the church stood in relation to Antinomianism was that it should be led astray from the basic reality of the faith by the plausible and high-sounding teachings of the Antinomians. They were wont to describe themselves as those who had plumbed the depths of the knowledge of good and evil, who understood aright the mystery of

1. Revelation 2:14.

evil,[1] and who hence were emanicipated from ordinary conceptions of good and evil. Hence they were the elite, the instructed, the true sophisticates, in contrast to other people who were simple and ignorant. To the instructed Christian, these Antinomians held, no blame inhered in the sins of the flesh, since the flesh was either completely divorced from the spirit, or else its deeds were a matter of indifference to the spirit through the free grace and forgiveness of God through Christ to those who had faith in Him.

Such manifest distortion of Paulinism would, of course, have been ruthlessly repudiated by the apostle himself, and by any who pierced below the surface of his teaching to understand its essential meaning. It is probably not without significance that Antinomianism was so thoroughly repudiated by the Ephesian church, which had had the benefit of a much longer ministry of Paul than other churches had. In the more than two years of his residence in their midst, the Ephesians had really learned to understand him, and to catch the spirit of his teaching. But others, who had not had such close acquaintance with the apostle, stood unwittingly in danger of being wooed and won by the suggestive and seductive ideas which the Antinomians fostered.

For the Antinomian teaching provided a perfect <u>rationale</u> for one of the most perplexing and difficult questions of the Christian life, a question to which we will return again and again in this study. The Christians in Asia faced a paganism strong and virile and aggressive. Its society and culture were well established, and one's position in the community depended in large measure upon participation in the social and cultural institutions of its life. The personal and collective purity demanded by the Christian faith raised grave doubts in the minds of its adherents about the propriety of

1. See Section IV below: the letter to the church at Thyatira.

2. Acts 15:19, 20, 29.

3. Chapter 8.

engaging in some of the practices which were specifically part of the common life.[1]

The presence, then, of the Antinomian philosophy, preaching the doctrine of moral indifference, provided a perfect scheme of thought to undergird the widest possible participation in community life and to do so in consonance with pseudo-Christian principles.

In practice the problem of Antinomianism had two foci for the Christian churches, so closely related as to be virtually one problem in different aspects. One was the matter of eating meat which had been sacrificed to idols. The other was the commission of fornication. These are, interestingly enough, two of the foci about which the declaration of the Council of Jerusalem had revolved

> Wherefor my judgment is (said James), that we trouble not them that from among the Gentiles turn to God; but that we write unto them, that they abstain from the pollution of idols, and from fornication, and from what is strangled, and from blood....from which if ye keep yourselves, it shall be well with you.[2]

The same general type of problem is a major concern with the writers of the Catholic Epistles, and it is a matter with which Paul felt constrained to deal in the first Epistle to Corinth.[3]

That is to say, the main problem of community-participation, and its consequential involvement in idol-worship (by inference) and fornication, was not confined to any particular decade or locale of the early church, but was an underlying cause of tension and confusion in all of them. We are face to face here, in the introduction of the Nicolaitans in this Ephesian letter, with one of the most fundamental and dangerous ethical concerns of the early church, and, especially for our purposes in this study, of the Asian churches to whom the Apocalypse is addressed.

1. Revelation 2:6.

2. Revelation 2:14, 15.

3. Revelation 2:20.

John speaks of these Antinimians under three names: Nicolaitans, as in this letter to the Ephesian church, and to the church at Pergamum; Balaamities, or followers of Balaam, in the letter to Pergamum; and followers of Jezebel, in the letter to the Thyatirans. The actual references in each instance are scant and leave much to be desired by the interpreter.

> But this thou hast, that thou hatest, the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.[1]

> But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also some that hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans in like manner.[2]

> But I have this against thee, that thou sufferest the woman Jezebel, who calleth herself a prophetess; and she teacheth and seduceth my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed to idols.[3]

Of these characterizations, two are cast in the form of reminiscences of Old Testament personages, about whom certain qualities might be observed which led John to relate to them the Antinomians of his day. These, the "Balaamites", and the "Jezebelites", will be dealt with in due course below. About the other, the "Nicolaitans", there is some mystery. Is the term used to denote a special, existing sect, or in a sort of general way to denote Antinomians as a whole? Does the name derive from their being followers of one Nicolas, or from the Greek νικάω and λαός, which in combination can mean "conqueror of the people"? Is there here, in typical Hebraic style, a play on words, involving the Greek "Nicolas" and the Hebrew "Balaam"? These are among the questions which must be dealt with if the term is to assume any shape and substance.

The concensus of scholarly opinion seems to be that the Nicolaitans represent a sect commonly known by that name, and in existence for long

1. "Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia", pp. 114 - 116.

enough before the writing of the Apocalypse (circa 96, A. D.) to have become well known and influential throughout the province of Asia. It is further suggested that Thyatira was either a focal point of the teaching, or indeed, its very fountainhead, a point which will be later considered in the discussion of the Thyatiran letter. The only significant departure from this concensus is a vigorous dissent by Archbishop Trench:

> The Nicolaitans then or Balaamities, are no sect that in early times bore one of these names or the other; but those who, after the pattern of Balaam's sin sought to introduce a false freedom, the freedom of the flesh, into the church of God. These were the foremost tempters of the church in the later apostolic times when the Apocalypse was written, and in the time immediately preceding....But it may be urged against this view of the matter that we find Nicolaitans in the second century. Doubtless we do so....At the same time, there is no need to suppose that they were the spiritual descendants of actual Nicolaitans, of libertines, I mean, bearing this name, in the times of the Apostle. Rather, springing up at a later day, one of the innumerable branches of the Gnostic heresy, they assumed this name which they found ready made for them in the Apocalypse.[1]

This is a persuasive theory, and regretfully to be put aside. But the preponderance of the evidence seems to incline to the majority view. If the Nicolaitans were not a well-known and distinctly constituted body, the references to them are too slight to be of much help in identifying them for the first readers of the Apocalypse. If it be argued that the same holds true of the Balaamites and Jezebelites, it may be pointed out that these two groups (or names under which the same sect is addressed), have as their spiritual progenitors persons well known in the Old Testament scriptures, and that the Old Testament would not have been a completely unknown book, even to Gentile Christians of that day. The Nicolaitans were a sect, with characteristics of Antinomian nature, and of some large, widespread, and pernicious influence upon the church at large.

1. Adv. Haer., 1:26.

2. Acts 6:5.

3. Ref. Haer. 7:24.

4. "The Revelation of St. John the Divine", Expositor's Greek Testament, Volume V., p. 351.

5. Cf. the statement above by Clement of Alexandria.

Whence is the name of the sect? We have no New Testament indication at all,[1] but there is a good bit of Patristic tradition at hand. Irenaeus states that the Nicolaitans were the followers of Nicolas, the proselyte (to Judaism) of Antioch, who was one of the seven men selected by the Jerusalem church to look after the daily ministration.[2] Hippolytus[3] declares that Nicolas was a heretic, who "departed from correct doctrine" and inculcated "indifference of life." In Moffatt's words, "he is alleged.... to have lapsed into antinomian license as the result of an overstrained asceticism."[4]

Clement of Alexandria, however, declares that Nicolas was not really responsible for the excesses of his followers, who might rather be called his abusers, since they interpreted in a sensual way language which he had employed in a spiritual sense.

It must be said of this whole patristic tradition that it is confused, and not quite clear or convincing. The testimony about Nicolas is not unanimous[5] by any means, and, more important, it always arises not in connection with the mention of Nicolas in Acts 6, but here in the Apocalypse, when the sixth and fourteenth verses of chapter two are under discussion. That is to say, the Fathers in discussing the Nicolaitans, seem to hit upon Nicolas the deacon as the founder, perhaps for no stronger reason than that none other of that name seems to have been known. This is the view of Düsterdieck:

> Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Jerome, Augustine, and other Church Fathers derive the sect from a founder Nicolas, and that, too, the deacon mentioned in Acts vi. 5, of whom they have more to relate as they are more remote from him in time. That this is derived entirely from this passage, and is of no more importance than that according to which the Ebionities are represented as springing from a certain Ebion (cf. Tertullian, l.c.33.), is shown first, from the fluctuation of the tradition which also knew how to defend that church officer, so highly commended in Acts, from the disgrace of having founded a troublesome sect, and

1. "Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Revelation of John", p. 134.

> secondly, from the circumstance that the patristic tradition, from the very beginning, refers to Rev. ii. 6, 14 sqq. Nicolas of Acts vi. was thought of because none other of that name was known.[1]

On the whole, it seems right to accept the general form of Dusterdieck's position. The most we can say about the sect is that it is likely to have gained its name from some Nicolas, whose teaching, when interpreted either naturally, or in distortion, gave license to the passions in the name of freedom or of moral indifference.

This view of the origin of the name "Nicolaitan", is in face of a widely held theory propounded by Heumann in 1712, and since then a significant factor in the interpretation of this passage. Heumann proposes that the name "Nicolas", i.e., "conqueror of the people", is to be equated with "Balaam", i.e., destroyer, or corrupter of the people." Such a play on words would undoubtedly be in the best Semitic tradition, and the two words are roughly etymological equivalents. However, there is no exact Hebraic equivalent for Νικόλαος. So that against this ingenious hypothesis it must be urged that the parallel is a shaky one etymologically, at the very best which can be made of it; that in this passage the details are all historical and not symbolic, though too much should not be made of that. And, much more serious, is the fact that in the letter to Pergamum the Balaamites and the Nicolaitans are spoken of as distinct and separate. There are those who follow the teaching of Balaam. Likewise there are those who in the same manner follow the Nicolaitans.

It would appear, then, that we are dealing with a number of Antinomian groups, not integrated as to leadership, but similar, perhaps almost identical, in their views, equally to be condemned, and sufficiently like to be lumped together in the somewhat casual and imprecise way which John employs. But if we are unable to give clear and certain answers about the

1. Adv. Haer., 1:26.

2. Adv. Marc., 1:29.

3. Ad. Trall., 11.

4. Strom. 2:20.

5. Genesis 2:9.

6. "Revelation", p. 139.

7. So R. H. Charles, "The Revelation of St. John", Volume I, p. 55.

leadership of the Nicolaitans, we are in no doubt at all about their nature. It is the eating of meats sacrificed to idols, and fornication which John condemns in them. To this Irenaeus adds that they "lived lives of unrestrained indulgence; teaching that adultery and eating things sacrificed to idols are a matter of 'indifference'".[1] Tertullian declares them to be destroyers of the happiness of sanctity in their maintenance of lust and luxury.[2] Ignatius brands them as impure lovers of pleasure,[3] and Clement of Alexandria speaks of their souls as buried in the mire of vice.[4]

Following his declaration that the Ephesians are in line with the mind of their Lord by their repudiation of the Nicolaitans, the Apocalyptist enjoins that "who hath an ear" is to regard the message to the churches. To the one who overcomes, that is, to the one who proves faithful to his responsibilities, shall be given the right to eat of the tree of life in the paradise of God. This is the tree of life which is mentioned in the book of Genesis[5] as being in the garden which God planted. It is also mentioned several times in the twenty second chapter of the Apocalypse, as part of the vision of the New Jerusalem.

There is no indication in the promise as to the nature of the foe to be overcome. The verb is used absolutely. But the victory is not stated as completed. Writes C. A. A. Scott:

> in the promises (the emphasis) is on the continuous overcoming, the life of victory. The final victory and its reward are the fruits of innumerable antecedent victories, each of which also received its reward of the like character with the crowning one.[6]

The Paradise of God has become equivalent, for John, to the New Jerusalem which is to descend from the Father out of Heaven.[7] The garden of the Genesis story has been thus transmuted into a place of spiritual blessedness in the midst of which the faithful will be fully satisfied through

their communion with the God of the garden.

The Ephesian church is revealed, in this letter, as a loyal, clear-thinking, devoted community of Christians, whose chief object seems to have been the maintenance of a pure doctrinal system. False teaching had no chance among these people. But the inquisitorial spirit which so often accompanies heresy-hunting had infected the church until the kindly, loving, forgiving spirit so typical of Christians, had lessened seriously. So the church is warned to recapture its first love, lest destruction come. The promise is made that such repentance will be rewarded by entrance into the Father's Kingdom, the Paradise of God.

B. THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA
Revelation 2:8 - 11

> And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These things saith the first and the last, who was dead, and lived again: I know thy tribulation, and thy poverty (but thou art rich), and the blasphemy of them that say they are Jews, and they are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Fear not the things which thou art about to suffer: behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days. Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches. He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.

Hardly second to Ephesus in the value of her commerce, the great city of Smyrna was perhaps the most brilliant and beautiful city of the province of Asia in the days of the Romans. It has continued from those days, and is the only important city from among the seven remaining into modern times. This ancient and important city was captured by the Lydians about the end of the seventh century B. C. It ceased to exist as a Greek city at that time, and for the period of more than three centuries it existed only as an Oriental town, or series of villages. Then, somewhere around the turn of the third century B. C. it was refounded as a Greek city a few miles from its former site by Lysimachus, and took up its interrupted history. At the time of the beginning of the Christian era, it strove with Ephesus and Pergamum for the title πρώτη Ἀσίας . It formed the maritime outlet for the trade of the Hermus valley, and was a true metropolis. This city had, in 23 A. D., gained the privilege of erecting a temple to Tiberius, the only city among those contending for the honor to be so favored. As Ramsay tells the story,

> the claim of Pergamum was rejected because it already had the temple dedicated by the province to Augustus: that of Ephesus because it was sufficiently weighted by the worship and temple of Artemis: that of Laodicea, Tralles, etc. because they were not sufficiently great. Halicarnassus was carefully considered, but at last the choice lay between Sardis and Smyrna. Sardis relied chiefly upon its past history, and quoted, amidst other evidence on

1. Article, "Smyrna", Hastings Dictionary of the Bible, Volume IV, p. 554.

2. Charles, R. H., "The Revelation of St. John", Volume I, p. 56.

3. Düsterdieck, F., "Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Revelation of John", p. 137.

4. Charles, R. H., "The Revelation of St. John", Volume I, p. 57.

> its side, a decree passed in its honor by the twelve ancient Etruscan cities. But the Smyrneans could appeal to their faithful friendship and alliance with Rome; and they mentioned that they had dedicated a temple to the goddess Rome in B. C. 195, before the eastern cities had learned by experience that Rome was the one supreme power in the world. The claim of Smyrna was preferred to that of Sardis, thus marking the superior dignity of the former in the province.[1]

Of the early history of the church in Smyrna the New Testament has no word to say. One ancient authority, the Vita Polycarpi,[2] tells us that St. Paul visited Smyrna on his way to Ephesus. "All they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of God," is the testimony of Acts 19:10. Of Christian life at Smyrna "we have (except that in the Apocalypse) the earliest statement in the Epistle of Ignatius (Ep. ad. Smyrn., ad. Polycarp),[3] at the beginning of the second century." Nothing definite can be deduced from these meagre statements.

Smyrna had a large Jewish population, described as being bitterly hostile to the Christians:

> Justin (Dial. xvi. 11, xlvii. 15. xcvi. 5, etc.) charges the Jews generally with cursing in their synagogues those that believed on Christ; and Tertullian with instigating the persecution of the Christians (Scorp. 10, "Synagogas Judaeorum, fontes persecutionum") cf. Euseb. H.E. v. 16.[4]

In the popular outburst which led to the death of the Christian Bishop Polycarp in A. D. 155, the Jews are reliably reported to have played a prominent part. Not only did they join with the pagans in demanding from the reportedly unwilling Asiarch the death of the aged leader, but they actually accused Polycarp of hostility to the state religion, to which they themselves, had they been true to their faith, must have been bitterly opposed. Then, when the popular clamor had prevailed, and Polycarp was condemned, the Jews busied

1. "The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia", p. 269.

themselves in fetching and arranging the wood of his pyre. To cap the climax of their wickedness, all of this took place upon the Sabbath day, and in the arena of the city, where the Jews had no business being upon the day of Jehovah.

But if some of the inhabitants of Smyrna were unlovely in their characters, the city itself was a jewel of beauty. Circling its rounded hilltop were impressive buildings in orderly array, till it seemed to wear a crown in queenly dignity.

To this city of prestige and strength, rather to its church, John the Apocalyptist addressed the second letter of the seven, in terms of the most intimate and joyous approbation. Gone is the tone of wistful remembrance of things past and grave sorrow for the shortcomings of the present which marked the Ephesian letter. The Smyrnaeans have won a victory over circumstances which threatened them constantly, and John rejoices with them in their fortitude.

The letter opens with the phrase "the first and the last, who was dead, and lived again." This characterization of the one who speaks to the church is not drawn from the vision of Christ walking in the midst of the golden candlesticks, but from the earlier section of the first chapter. The meaning of this address is, according to Ramsay, obscured because of the

> unfortunate mistranslation which mars both the Authorised and the Revised Versions, "was dead and lived again." The insertion of this word again is unjustified and unjustifiable: there is nothing in the Greek corresponding to it....the analogy of Rev. xii. 2 ff. corroborates the plain sense of this letter. The idea is, not that life begins a second time after a period of death, but that life persists in and through death....If anything should be inserted in the translation to make the meaning quite clear, the word needed is "yet," "which was dead and yet lived"....again, the phrase "was dead" also is not an exact equivalent of the Greek words ἐγένετο νεκρός: it would be nearer the true force of the Greek to render "became dead" or "became a corpse."[1]

1. "Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Revelation of John", p. 138.

It is no coincidence that these are the words which open this particular letter. Like Him who addresses her, Smyrna had died and yet lived. The three centuries and more when she had not existed as a city had not destroyed the spirit nor the nature of Smyrna, which had risen again to a place of honor and glory among her sister metropolises. And certainly the whole tone of this letter is instinct with life.

The Smyrnaean church was poor in material, but rich in the spirit, even through the persecution and tribulation which it was constantly undergoing at the hands of the Jews and the pagans whom doubtless the Jews spurred on and encouraged. Indeed, it may well be that the poverty of the church resulted from the systematic spoliation of the Christians by the Jews. Or, conversely, it may be that the poverty of the people made their lot harder, when they could not muster sufficient money to fight unwarranted charges out in the venal courts.

In any event, the steadfastness of the church through its tribulation had made it rich with the riches of God, furnished it with spiritual fruit. To seek out the name Polycarp (rich in fruit) in symbolic fashion in this phrase as some do, is surely arbitrary, as Dusterdieck declares.[1]

For some reason, the Jews of Smyrna seem to have been more hostile to the Christians than were the Jews of Asia generally. These who are spoken of were in all probability actually Jews by birth, but not in spiritual reality. This John indicates when he describes them as "those who say they are Jews, and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." No doubt their vigorous missionary zeal must have made trouble for the Christians with the Jews, particularly, as Kiddle thinks, among Gentile "God-fearers" on the fringe of Judaism. The Epistle of Ignatius to Smyrna attests the fact of an accession of converts.[2]

1. Note XXX on this phrase in Düsterdieck, F., "Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Revelation of John", p. 156: "So Alford: 'The expression is probably used to signify a short and limited time.' Also Trench."

2. Vincent, Marvin R., "Word Studies in the New Testament", Volume II, p. 445.

3. Charles, R. H., "The Revelation of St. John", Volume I, p. 58.

4. Ramsay, W. M., "The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia", p. 275.

The action of the persecutors is ascribed to the spirit which prompts it: the devil is about to cast some into prison. It is a veiled allusion to the increment of suffering which is to be visited upon the church as a whole, and upon Smyrna in particular. Having lived in tribulation, that church is well prepared for more tribulation, which is, after all, only for a short time, the symbolic reading of "ten days".[1] This ordeal will be, in truth, an opportunity for those who stand fast to reap their true reward. The crown of life will be given to them. Three explanations at least have been given of the crown:

> the image is not taken from the Greek games....it is the diadem of royalty rather than the garland of victory.... it is not likely that John would use an image from the games, since there was the most violent prejudice against them on the part of the Jewish Christians.[2]

> the figure appears to be borrowed from the wreath awarded to the victor in the games.[3]

> the mention of the crown would carry a special meaning to the Smyrnean readers, and would rouse in their hearts many old associations. The "crown of Smyrna" had been before their eyes and minds from childhood. The promise now is that a new crown shall be given to Smyrna. She shall no more wear a mere crown of buildings and towers, nor even a crown of good citizens.... but a crown of life....the true Smyrna shall wear a crown suited for the servants of the one living God.[4]

It is possible, of course, to make too much of geographical and historical allusions in the letters, to make more, indeed, than is there. Some commentators are inclined to discount rather heavily the work of Ramsay, feeling that he works too hard on the hypothesis that the letters can best be interpreted in terms of the situations of the cities. But there is an impressive weight of allusion and the cunning use of historical reference in these letters which cannot be gainsaid. Moreover, Ramsay's work is so exhaustive, and in some areas, so conclusive, that one inclines

1. Revelation 20:11 - 15.

to accept his interpretation in the absence of any compelling objection. No such objection seems to be here, and accordingly, the crown of life is taken to allude to the features of Smyrnean's life spoken of in the quotation from Ramsay.

The second death, deliverance from which forms the final promise of the letter was the final condemnation of the wicked at the judgment of God.[1] The faithful souls at Smyrna had no terror of spiritual death. They had passed through fire already, and had stood firm. The distinctively Christian ethical qualities of personal life were theirs: good works, faith, and stedfastness. It may have been characteristic of the church of that day to face difficult tensions in the matter of community participation. Christians may have been sorely tried and influenced to worship the emperor in seemingly innocuous ways. Failure may have been the measure of the life of some churches. But equally characteristic was the earnest stedfastness of purpose for which the church at Smyrna remains a synonym in our minds, the patient endurance in the face of persecution, and tribulation, and the railing of opponents who eagerly sought destruction of the little bands of Christians.

The Epistle to Smyrna is evidence that the Church of Christ can be triumphant in the most unpromising situation through faith and stedfastness.

C. THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT PERGAMUM
Revelation 2:12 - 17

> And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These things saith he that hath the sharp two-edged sword: I know where thou dwellest, even where Satan's throne is; and thou holdest fast my name, and didst not deny my faith, even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwelleth. But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there some that hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also some that hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans in like manner. Repent therefore; or else I come to thee quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of my mouth. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches. To him that overcometh, to him will I give of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and upon the stone a new name written, which no one knoweth but he that receiveth it.

Pergamum, or Pergamus, was an ancient city located to the north of Smyrna, and some fifteen miles inland from the coast. Thus it was not a commercial city of such stature as Smyrna and Ephesus. But historically and politically it was of greater importance than either of them. Until 133 B. C. it had been the capital of a flourishing native state. In that year Attalus III, its monarch, died, leaving a will which bequeathed his entire kingdom to the Romans. Under Roman rule the kingdom was organized as a Roman province, with Pergamum as the capital. This long-established city easily exercised dominance over the entire area known to us as the province of Asia, and in consequence became known as the capital of the whole province.

The relatively unfavorable commercial position which Pergamum held as a result of being inland, however, militated against her continued influence, and the power of the rival city of Ephesus began to increase as that of Pergamum decreased. By the middle of the second century after Christ Ephesus was established beyond question as the capital of Asia.

1. "The Revelation of St. John", p. 30.

But just when the change from the one to the other took place officially it is impossible to say. It goes without question, however, that in the days of the writing of the Apocalypse, if Pergamum was not still the actual capital of Asia, she had been so up until so recent a time that people would still remember that she had been the capital.

Pergamum,as the chief city in the province, established in the year 29 B. C. a temple dedicated to Augustus and Imperial Rome. This preceded by three years the establishment of a temple in Smyrna, and Pergamum became the leader in the cult of the Emperor. A second temple was later built in Pergamum in honor of Trajan, and still a third honoring Severus. Thus Pergamum became the acknowledged leader of the emperor cult in the province of Asia, a fact which is of the greatest importance for a sound interpretation of the Epistle to the church here described. This, then, was a royal city, an ancient provincial capital, and the stronghold of the imperial cultus.

Here, too, was a great temple to the god Asklepios, known better to us as Aesculapius, the god of healing. The special emblem of this god was the serpent, which would suggest to Christians an immediate connection with Satan. As Kiddle remarks,

> to the worshippers of this god, the serpent was a symbol of renewal; but to Christians it was the unmistakable sign of Satan. The worship of Aesculapius was neither formal nor perfunctory. His priests, who had treasured medical secrets in their care, performed their duties with true reverence and humanity, and their devotion was reflected in the firm hold of Aesculapius on his followers.[1]

The serpent appears again as a motif of Pergamum upon the great altar of Zeus which had, for two centuries before the Apocalypse was written, dominated the Acropolis, which in its turn stood high above the city. This altar contained a series of huge figures, representing the war of

1. Cf. Revelation 1:16.

2. Hebrews 4:12.

the gods on the giants, and the giants were depicted as having serpentine tails instead of legs. It is no wonder that John comments upon the Satanic nature of the dwelling-place of the Pergamenian Christians.

It is to the church of this royal and provincial capital, a city accustomed to authority and pomp, seat alike of the Imperial cult and of strong pagan cults, that the Apocalyptist addresses his third letter.

The epistle begins in the usual fashion, with the charge to write to the church, followed by a characterization of the Lord, this time as the "one who has the sharp two-edged sword."[1] He is thus revealed as one who has authority, who holds the power of life and death, whose words are not idle, but are enforceable and penetrating. The sword is a symbol of the discriminating and divisive power of the Word. The words of the writer to the Hebrews are strikingly apposite here:

> For the word of God is living, and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and quick to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart.[2]

Christ speaks with the authority of the sword of the spirit to a city to which secular authority was no stranger. It is a compelling picture.

In the next verse reference is made to the nature of the city in which the church dwells: it is where Satan's throne is. The presence in the city of so much evidence of willingness and readiness to subscribe to the cult of the Emperor awakened in the Christians the deepest revulsion, for this was blasphemy and idolatry in its worst form. Here lay the peculiar aggravation and abomination, says Ramsay, for

> it was the worship of the Emperors that was recognized, when the Apocalypse was written, as the special foe of Christianity, as Antichrist, as Satan. It was the refusal of the Christians to pay the proper respect to the emperor by performing the prescribed acts of ritual and worship in the imperial religion that formed the

1. Article, "Pergamum", Hastings Dictionary of the Bible, Volume III, pp. 750, 751.

2. I Corinthians 8:5.

> test by which they could be detected, and the reason why they were outlawed; their refusal was interpreted as a proof of disloyalty and treason, for it was a refusal to acquiesce in,,and to be members of, the imperial unity. Pergamum, as the chief center of that imperial worship for the province, was the seat and "the throne of Satan."[1]

Here we meet head-on the fundamental Christian problem of the early days of the Church, insofar as its relations with the outside world were concerned. The cult of the Emperor was the means by which the Romans endeavored to give a degree of solidarity to the agglomeration of nations and peoples which made up its sprawling and far-flung empire. No existent principle of unity had proved sufficiently binding to hold the constituent elements together. There was no common loyalty to a tradition, no common origin of race or clan, no common interest, no geographical forces compelling united effort, no common speech to make communication easy. For parts of the empire, one, or even several, of these considerations might be efficacious. But no one of them was broad enough to bind the whole empire together, to make it feel its oneness. The only common force was the strength of the Roman legions, and the conquerors were wise enough to know that they could not forever depend upon force of arms. In the search for a comprehensive principle of unification, they hit upon an obvious and powerful device. Everywhere in that ancient world altars were to be seen. There were "gods many and lords many."[2] No town was so mean as to boast no temple, and most of them had the shrines of several deities within their precincts. Religion, especially in the form of the pagan religions which depended upon many deities, was a universal element of the common life.

What, then, could be more simple than to add to the pantheon one deity more: the Roman Emperor deified and exalted. Worship at his shrine would in all respects be parallel to the worship of those deities at whose

shrines the people were already accustomed to bow. Only in one respect would the new cult differ from the older ones: the new worship would be universally spread throughout the Empire, and participation in its rites would be compulsory.

This deification of the Emperor was made for formal purposes only. He was construed as summing up in his person all the dignity and worth of the mighty empire of which he was head. He was worshipped in a representative capacity. To drop incense upon the Emperor's shrine was the equivalent of a declaration of allegiance to Rome and her purposes, a pledge of solidarity and of participation in the imperial unity.

To Christians, of course, any such worship was idolatrous and to be shunned absolutely no matter what the consequences. And, since Rome naturally bent every effort to enforce conformity to the imperial cult and participation in its worship, clashes came early and often. Christians were not at first much persecuted by the Romans, at least not officially, except upon this one issue. It was however the concern of the church for many years that its members should stand firm even through torture and death, rather than make to a mortal man the sign of allegiance that belonged only to God.

The main purpose and the special emphasis of the Apocalypse in its entirety is to encourage the Christian churches to stand fast in the faith no matter what persecutions Rome might bring upon them. For, as a result of the Christian intransigence as to emperor worship, the offical attitude of Rome toward them had changed. Imperial Rome was being forced to take cognizance of the new spiritual world-power which in Christianity had arisen to challenge her. Claiming absolute power, as she did, Rome could brook no rival which stiffened men's resistance until they defied threats of

1. In this verse the word "witness" (μάρτυς) is in transition from the ordinary and general meaning, i.e., one who testifies or bears witness, to that special Christian significance, indicated in English by simple transliteration in the term "martyr", which it has in Christian history dating from this time or shortly after, i.e., one who gives his life for the sake of Christ and the gospel.

2. "The Revelation of St. John", p. 31.

every sort and dared to stand against even death itself.

The church at Pergamum, in the very stronghold of emperor worship, had shown remarkable constancy in its refusal to be tainted by the idolatrous worship. Even though it had undoubtedly meant inconvenience, heartache, and danger to stand firm against the pressure of the cult it had done so. The martyrdom of one of its members, Antipas, had in no wise lessened the church's determination. Indeed, the name of Antipas may well have become a watchword, to sustain other Christians in the hour of trial. Others of the brethren had borne their witness better because of his faithful testimony even unto death.[1]

Antipas may have been the first martyr in Asia, but he was not to be the last. Any Christian who would "hold fast My name", i.e., insist upon adherence to Christ and to Him alone might at any time suffer the same fate. That in this situation the Pergamenians were stedfast is a matter of great satisfaction to the Apocalyptist. They had tremendous love and loyalty for Christ, so that they become across the ages a living testimonial to the power of Christ's spirit to keep a people steady in the face of any danger, however grave.

But there was another peril which faced the church at Pergamum, and with this one it did not cope so successfully. The danger of false teaching was clearly recognized and dealt with by the church at Ephesus, even at the expense of love. But the Pergamenian church (and its sister church at Thyatira) had, according to Kiddle, "a loose tolerance of men who compromised the purity of the faith."[2]

The Christians of Pergamum faced an ethical problem common to the years of the first Christian century: how far may participation in the life of a pagan community go before it becomes disloyalty to the heart of the gospel?

1. Revelation 2:14.

2. II Peter 2:15, 16.

3. To delineate the character of Balaam, and to illustrate the state of the narrative in which he appears, a brief excursus into Old Testament sources and introduction will be helpful.

4. Number 31: Cf. also Deuteronomy 23:4, 5; Joshua 13:22; 24:9, 10; Nehemiah 13:2; Micah 6:5.

Can a Christian divorce his community life from his religious life? Can he participate in rites and ceremonies which, being pagan have no further religious significance for him? Dare he sanction, by allowing it to flourish in his church, teaching which encourages more widespread participation in community life than he considers proper? There is no evidence in the letter that the church as a whole was implicated in practices which would condemn it out of hand. But the community of the saints was not unalloyedly pure. There were,

> . some that hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumbling-block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication.[1]

Whatever may have been the influence of these false teachers, and on the whole it appears that it was not widespread, the church was to blame for not taking a firm stand against the evil teaching and the wicked practices which clearly showed the aberration of the teachers from the main line of Christian interpretation. What was lacking to the Pergamenian Christians was enough toughness of moral fibre to denounce a practice of other people which might easily lead to the corruption of the faithful.

The characterization of these teachers as Balaams of the contemporary scene is most interesting. This is the more so because of a pair of references in the General Epistles to this same Old Testament figure. In Jude, verse 11, we read of those who "ran riotiously in the error of Balaam for hire;" and the Second Epistle of Peter speaks of those who were

> forsaking the right way, they went astray having followed the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the hire of wrong-doing; but he was rebuked for his own transgression: a dumb ass spake with man's voice, and stayed the madness of the prophet.[2]

The reference is to that Balaam who appears in the remarkable story in Numbers 22 - 24,[3] and elsewhere later in the same book.[4] The movement

1. "An Introduction to the Books of the Old Testament", p. 38.

2. "Introduction to the Old Testament", p. 171.

3. "An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament", pp. 66, 67.

of the Israelites toward the kingdom of Moab was greatly alarming that country, and its king Balak. In an attempt to stem the tide, Balak sent for Balaam, who was apparently, a well-known prophet of the region. The king desired to employ the prophet to curse the Israelites for him, hoping thereby to make them an easy prey for his Moabitish armies. The story of the events which followed Balak's solicition is confusing as it now stands in the Pentateuch. It seems to be a composite narrative made up of the major source-threads of the Pentateuch. According to the analysis of Oesterly and Robinson,[1] chapter 22 of Numbers is made up of approximately equal portions of J and E, chapter 23 stems entire from the E document, and 24 from J. Pfeiffer's more radical criticism agrees in the main substance, but denies to J the oracles of Balaam:

> The stories about Balaam are generally divided between J and E, although the prophetic oracles contained therein were not composed by the author of these documents (22:2 - 21, 35b - 41; 23:1 - 30; 24:25, with minor omissions are usually assigned to E). The Baal Peor incident seems to be JE.[2]

Driver states that

> 22:2 - 41 (except v. 22 - 35a) may be assigned with some confidence to E; observe God almost uniformly (not Jehovah) and comp. v. 9a. 20a with Gen. 20:3, 31:24 (both E). V. 22 - 35a (the episode of the ass) is taken from a different source, viz. J; notice (a) in v. 21 Baalam goes "with the princes of Moab", in v. 22 ff. he is evidently alone; (b) in the main narrative of the ch. Balaam, at the second message from Balak, receives permission to go, provided only that he speaks what is put into his mouth by God; the episode implies that no permission to go had been given to him, and he is first taught by the angel on the way that he is only to speak what is put into his mouth; (c) Jehovah (not God). It is uncertain whether ch. 23 - 24 belong to J or E, or whether they are the work of the compiler who has made use of both sources: critics differ, and it is wisest to leave the question undetermined.[3]

1. Numbers 22:20.

2. Numbers 23:7 - 10, 18 - 24; 24:3 - 9.

3. Numbers 23:15 - 19.

One point more should perhaps be mentioned. It is in Numbers 31:16 where we read that it was through the "counsel of Balaam" that the children of Israel committed trespass against Jehovah in the matter of Peor. This chapter 31 is commonly held to stem from still another source: the priestly narrative P. Thus, differing points of view in the production of the story itself as well as in references to Balaam in the New Testament, are quite sufficient to account for the resultant confusion which beclouds any attempt to uncover just what is being said in the reference to Baalam in this letter to the church at Pergamum.

To return to the thread of the Old Testament narrative as it runs through Numbers 22 - 24: in one phase of the story Balaam is reluctant to heed the summons to attend on Balak of Moab, but finally receives the permission of God to accompany Balak's emissaries, with the understanding that whatever he says shall derive strictly from what God gives him to say.[1] But, in the very next verse, the shifting emphasis declares that God's anger was kindled against him because he went, and Balaam is dissuaded from the venture by the intervention of the well-known talking ass. In any event, the prophet arrived in the court of Balak, and in the course of several conversations, made it quite clear to the king that the only words he had to say were the words which God gave him, and that these words, furthermore, were not against Israel, but rather in her praise. Hence, what he contributed was no comfort to Moab at all.

In his earlier oracles Israel is seen as a singularly blessed and fortunate people marching under the protection of the Lord, bound to increase,[2] aggressive and sure to prosper. And in the final word which he spoke from God to Balak, Balaam specifically prophesied that Moab should be defeated by Israel, and become a tributary nation.[3] After these oracles,

1. Numbers 31:16.

Balaam left the king of the Moabites to think over his words, and returned home.

Certainly there is nothing in this record of events to lead the Apocalyptist to speak of Balaam was one who showed a heathen king how to overcome the religious scruples, and the strength of Israel. Yet, after the triumph of Israel over Moab, Moses specifically condemned to death all of the Moabitish women, declaring that they

> caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam to commit trespass against Jehovah in the manner of Peor, and so the plague was among the congregation of Jehovah.[1]

This is a clear reference to the practice of the Israelities in taking for themselves wives and concubines from among the Canaanitish people, and of joining with them in their rites to the gods of the land, in neglect of the worship of Jehovah. Moses points back to the account, preserved to us in Numbers 25, of this tendency, and of the swift, harsh, decisive action which he took to cut it out of the national life. That action came to be known as the "matter of Peor", because the particular Baal involved was named Peor.

It is only at Numbers 31:16 that Balaam is connected with such syncretistic devices as encouraging Hebrew participation in Canaanitish life and worship. There is certainly no hint in the previous narrative that he ever advised Balak to use the charms of his women to spread disloyalty to God and unchastity among the Israelites. Nevertheless, the New Testament references to this hapless prophet pay no attention at all to his apparently straightforward dealings, and focus upon the matter which at worst only infers his cupidity and cunning.

It would seem that something else, outside the Old Testament narrative

1. "Antiquities of the Jews", Book IV, Chapter 6:6. (Whiston Translation, p. 124, 125.)

material, was in the mind of these New Testament writers to cause them to lay such blame upon Balaam. In the Antiquities of Josephus, we come upon a story which may provide the key. This Jewish historian relates the following episode:

> But Balak being very angry that the Israelities were not cursed, sent away Balaam without thinking him worthy of any honor. Whereupon, when he was just upon his journey, in order to pass the Euphrates, he sent for Balak, and for the princes of the Midianites, and spoke thus to them: --"O Balak, and you Midianities that are here present (for I am obliged even without the will of God to gratify you), it is true that no entire destruction can seize upon the nation of the Hebrews, neither by war, nor by plague, nor by scarcity of the fruits of the earth, nor can any other unexpected accident be their entire ruin; for the providence of God is concerned to preserve them from such a misfortune; nor will it permit any such calamity to come upon them whereby they may all perish; but some small misfortunes, and those for a short time, whereby they may appear to be brought low, may still befall them; but after that they will flourish again, to the terror of those who have brought those mischiefs upon them. So that if you have a mind to gain a victory over them for a short space of time, you will obtain it by following my directions: --Do you therefore set out the handsomest of such of your daughters as are most eminent for beauty, and proper to force and conquer the modesty of those that behold them, and these decked and trimmed to the highest degree you are able. Then do you send them to be near the Israelites' camp, and give them in charge, that when the young men of the Hebrews desire their company, they allow it them; and when they see that they are enamoured of them, let them take their leaves; and if they entreat them to stay, let them not give their consent till they have persuaded them to leave off their obedience to their own laws, and the worship of that God who established them, and to worship the gods of the Midianites, and the Moabites; for by this means God will be angry at them." Accordingly, when Balaam had suggested this counsel to them, he went his way.[1]

In this account another side of the prophet is seen. He is indeed a grasping, self-seeking fellow. Yet his fear of Jehovah forbids him, even in this instance, to go counter to the main line of his prophecy. The Hebrew people are indeed a protected people, and destined for a great and

irresistible rise. Nevertheless, Balaam is not above giving some advice which capitalizes upon the natural weaknesses of soldiers, and which would certainly help in delaying, through a loss of singleness of purpose, the Israelitish conquest. This story corresponds so closely to the charge made by Jude, the second epistle of Peter, and the Apocalyptist that we are justified in thinking that it was this tradition which underlay the New Testament thinking about Balaam, rather than the more innocuous narrative recorded in the book of Numbers.

It is quite likely that these four accounts are all based upon a common tradition of the Jews about what really happened in the relationship between Balaam and Balak, and which tradition is lost to us, save in this passage from Josephus. In any event when the authors of Peter, Jude, and the Apocalypse bring Balaam into their discussions at all, it is in these highly uncomplimentary terms.

If we grant the truth of interpretation of Balaam which Josephus gives, it is quite proper to describe the Antinomians as Balaamities. The sins of which they were guilty were directly and closely related to the sly and evil counsel of Balaam which the Antiquities passage records. The Antinomians, as he, were guilty of leading the people into sin through the apparently innocuous participation in activities which were the prelude to infidelity to the best ideals of faithful worshippers of God.

Beside the Balaams of the day, the church at Pergamum was plagued with the presence of some members of the Nicolaitan sect. As has previously been noted in the discussion of the Ephesian letter, these two groups are here spoken of as separate and distinct. They were, however, almost certainly of the same type in their teaching and conduct. At least, the issue in terms of infidelity to God and impurity of life was the same

1. Revelation 2:16.

2. "Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia," p. 165.

3. Revelation 2:17.

for each. The phrase "in like manner" tells us that John considered them to be similar. The Nicolaitan challenge in Pergamum was probably not extreme. There are "some" who hold to it. But even "some" is too many, and the Apocalyptist adds a stern warning to the church. Except repentance be quick and real, "I will come to thee quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of my mouth."[1]

As the church at Ephesus had already dealt with the false teachers, and repudiated them, so the church at Pergamum is called upon to do. The penalty for not doing so is to face the sharp two-edged sword proceeding from the mouth of the Christ of the vision.

Here, according to Trench,

> we have....another allusion to the history of Balaam, namely to Num. xxxi. 8 (cf. Josh. xiii. 22): "Balaam also, the son of Beor, they slew with the sword;" this sword of the children of Israel being indeed the sword of God.[2]

Perhaps a better view would recall that the sharp sword can well be interpreted as the Word of God, and that reference to "war" being made with that sharp sword might be intended to symbolize the overcoming power of truth as it contends with error. The pitifully sordid and indulgent doctrines of the Nicolaitans could be no match for the blazing and absolute truth of the Master of all men.

The Pergamenians were thus challenged to deal with the cancerous toleration of false teaching which was their most severe fault. Antinomianism was an abomination in God's sight, and failure to condemn it was truly reprehensible. Swift punishment was sure to follow if the church continued its policy of soft toleration. But if the church, or any of its members, should rise to condemn the evil in Christ's name, rewards would follow. "Hidden manna"[3] is promised to the one who overcomes.

1. "Revelation", p. 144.

The concept of hidden manna has its roots deep in Jewish tradition and can only be understood when viewed in the light of the tradition. The summary by C. A. Scott puts the case well:

> Aaron had been commanded to "lay up" a pot or basket of the manna "before the Testimony" (Exodus xvi. 33). This was taken subsequently to mean "within the Ark" (so Hebrews ix. 4). In later times it became a tradition among the Jews that, before the destruction of Jerusalem, the Ark with all its contents was removed by Jeremiah, in accordance with Divine command, and hidden in a cave of Sinai (see 2 Macc. ii. 1); further, that when the expected advent of the Messiah took place, then these hidden things would be revealed and restored to their ancient place. Among the hidden things then to be revealed they counted the "manna". Thus in the Apocalypse of Baruch (xxix. 8) we read: "And at that time the store of manna shall descend again from above; and they shall eat of it in those years." It is, therefore, in terms of this Jewish expectation that the promise is here expressed (cf. John vi. 31 - 33). Those who overcome the temptation to indulge in forbidden meats will receive the heavenly manna as their reward, not merely the restoration of the old privilege, but the partaking of that "true bread from heaven" of which even the manna was but a symbol.[1]

The second promise to the one who overcomes is that he shall receive a white stone, upon which a new name is written. The name is to be a secret one, known only to him who receives it.

This promise has given rise to endless speculation. Several suggestions have been put forth: (1) the stone is related to the pebble whereby jurors signified acquittal, or (2) with the little stone placques or tiles which served as tickets of admission to feasts or large public gatherings, or (3) with the precious stones, which tradition asserted the Israelities had gathered along with the manna in the wilderness, or (4) with the Urim and Thummin, the sacred stones with which the priests cast the lots, and which were also inscribed with names.

There is some plausibility in each of these theories. Perhaps we should be wrong to try to eliminate all but one. The symbolism of the

1. Notably C. A. Scott, Charles and Swete.

2. Scott, C. A., "Revelation", pp. 144, 145.

Apocalypse is so rich and wide ranging that it may well be using an image with a multiplicity of meanings to add color and depth to the impression. But there is an interpretation which ties itself in perfectly well with the general tone of the passage, and which is favored by some of the finest commentators upon the Apocalypse.[1] According to this interpretation the white stone and its inscribed name represent the gift of God's divine favor whereby admission is granted to heaven. Also in the passage is an element taken from the popular superstition of the day which ascribed great and magical powers to the possession of the knowledge of certain secret names, the abacadabra of the "genie" stories of the east, the pronouncement of which

> secured the opening of closed portals, the discovery of hid treasures, or the cooperation of supernatural powers. One special application of such names of power was to obtain entrance for the ascending soul through the successive gates which were supposed to bar its way to the highest heaven. Such ideas found special currency and continual development in those quarters where Jewish and Hellenic thought were mingling, from which issued early in the second century the speculative systems of Gnosticism. To one holding such ideas, a white stone with a secret name upon it would signify an amulet inscribed with a formula or name of power by which he could secure salvation or entrance into heaven. To this....the Apocalypse gives a Christian interpretation. The white stone is just the pebble or tile or placque on which a name could be conveniently inscribed. The promised gift of Christ is the new name, which here, as elsewhere in the Bible, stands for a new character (Gen. xxxii. 28; Matt. xvi. 17, 18). Our Lord once more clothes his own great gift in the forms "understanded of the people", thereby contrasting the false with the true.[2]

So then, the Pergamenians, surrounded by the pagan worship of Aesculapius and the Emperor, infected within their own church by the perils of Antinomianism in some of its more seductive forms, needed both warning and promise to keep them steady. And what more steadying promise could there be than that of the approval and fellowship of God, and

assured belonging to His kingdom?

In this letter the church at Pergamum appears as a faithful, brave Christian community, striving against the influential emperor-cult even when Antipas became a martyr for the gospel's sake. But over the church hangs, like a dark cloud, the shadow of a false tolerance of an Antinomian minority, the presence of which can easily lead to the corruption and destruction of the church. Though this danger is present, there is yet time for the Pergamenians to make a determined Christian stand, whereupon heavenly rewards will be theirs.

D. THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT THYATIRA
Revelation 2:18 - 29

> And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like a flame of fire, and his feet are like unto burnished brass; I know thy works, and thy love and faith and ministry and patience, and that thy last works are more than the first. But I have this against thee, that thou sufferest the woman Jezebel, who calleth herself a prophetess; and she teacheth and seduceth my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time that she should repent; and she willeth not to repent of her fornication. Behold, I cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of her works. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he that searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto each one of you according to your works. But to you I say, to the rest that are in Thyatira, as many as have not this teaching, who know not the deep things of Satan, as they are wont to say; I cast upon you none other burden. Nevertheless that which ye have, hold fast till I come. And he that overcometh, and he that keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give authority over the nations; and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to shivers; as I also have received of my Father; and I will give him the morning star. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches.

This, the longest of the seven letters is addressed to the church in the least important of the seven cities. From about 190 B. C., Thyatira had been under Roman domination, as a city in the proconsulate of Asia. Its growth and development was determined, and restricted, by the fact that it did not lie upon any of the great trade routes of the day, but drew its strength for community life from the valley in which it was situated.

It is the first of the cities so far dealt with to have no temple of the emperor, no official cult or shrine of the state religion. But with respect to religion generally, Thyatira was not lacking. There were temples to Artemis, to the tutelary deity of the city, Apollo Tyrimnaios, and, just outside the city, there was a shrine to the Oriental Sibyl Sambathe, which was almost certainly a seat of propheoy and sooth-saying in the familiar oracular tradition.

1. Cf. Acts 16:14.

But the outstanding feature of the life of Thyatira, which sharply delineated it from the others of the seven churches, was the institution of the trade guilds, many of which are mentioned in the ancient inscriptions. Here were to be found guilds of bakers, potters, workers in brass, tanners, leather-cutters, workers in wool and flax, clothiers, dyers. The workers in wool and dyers were probably the most numerous and influential, for the manufacture and dyeing of woolens was a Lydian specialty in which the Thyatirans were especially adept.[1]

To belong to a guild was one of the most vital concerns of every tradesman and artisan; not only did it bring invaluable aid to his business, but certain social advantages as well. Each guild was a corporate body, governed by its elected officers, making decrees in honor of Roman officials and others who had aided it, constructing works for the public, and at times, holding considerable property and revenue under its direction. Most of the guilds were mutual aid benefit societies, caring for the membership in time of need. Thus the guild was one of the most vigorous manifestations of civic and social life in Thyatira, and on the whole was a praiseworthy and valuable institution in the community. The guilds, in modern terms, combined many of the functions of Chambers of Commerce, merchants' association, labor unions, service clubs, and insurance lodges. Yet it was these same guilds which presented certain dangers and challenges to the Christian community, as will be discussed below.

This letter opens with the declaration that it is sent to the church by the Son of God. This title would be a most meaningful one to the Thyatirans, for the pagan deity of the town was Apollo, son of the father-god Zeus. The One who here speaks to the church is the true Son of God, and not the pagan deity. The rest of the description of Christ in this letter maintains the contrast between the true and the false son of God, between Christ and Apollo.

1. "The Revelation of St. John", p. 37.

Kiddle aptly states the case, writing

> when John delivers to the Thyatirans the words of the Son of God, he makes an allusion bearing a direct message to them....A similar message is contained in the description of Christ as one whose feet glow like bronze--symbols of the punishment which was to crush both pagan oppressors and stubborn wrongdoers in the church. The extent of the allusion is uncertain. It is likely enough that the worshippers of Apollo Trymnaios trembled before a god whose character was often associated with punishment. But cannot we say more about the feet which glow like bronze? The word translated b r onze is met nowhere else except in Revelation. Was it a word aimed directly at the bronze-smiths and modellers of Thyatira? Or does the allusion carry us into the very temple of Apollo? For it would have been strange indeed if Apollo Trymnaios had lacked a bronze statue in a town where the craft seems to have been highly developed--a town, moreover, specifically under his protection....we may suspect that the passing of time has robbed John's words of their allusive riches.[1]

The letter continues, speaking warmly and with appreciation of the works of the Thyatiran Christians. This was a church with a warm and open heart, full of love and kindliness and good works; a church, moreover, which did not become weary in well-doing, but whose "last works were more than the first." Love and faith and ministry and patience are the works of this church. Christian progress was being made at Thyatira, in spite of all the false teaching which was finding soil and rootage in the church's life. That is the fault of Thyatira, a loose tolerance of Antinomian teaching.

There is a marked difference, in temper and mind, between churches. This is clearly evident in the series of seven letters under consideration. Ephesus had lost her first love, Thyatira was increased in love, Laodicea, as we shall see, was luke-warm and neutral. Perhaps churches like Thyatira, of warm and tender nature, are less strict about what they consider to be theological niceties, technicalities, and legal distinctions, than are churches of other sorts. For these warm-hearted churches, it is the deed and not the motive which is of paramount importance.

1. Haer. li., 33.

2. Charles, R. H., "The Revelation of St. John", Volume I, p. 69.

in the middle years of the last decade of the first century, such sweeping campaigns of coercion had been carried on that it was a matter of major consequence to the Christians, some of whom had already tasted the death of martyrdom, while others had known the sting of the lash and the squalor of prison.

If the problem of emperor-worship faced the Christians with an overt and threatening manifestation of the presence and power of evil in the world, the more subtle and personal problem of community-participation pressed upon their spirits with insistent force. In dealing with a community made up largely of pagan elements and over-whelmingly un-Christian, the question of where to draw the line between activities which could be safely shared with one's neighbors and associates and those which should be shunned by the conscientious Christian as being injurious to witness and to neighbor, was a fine one indeed. As preceding chapters have shown, it was a point at which the Christian mind was not universally consistent. Various positions still held place in the field. But all agreed that it was a difficult thing to be a Christian in the midst of so corrupt a paganism without soiling one's garment. Temptation to evil was present in almost every activity of daily life, from the purchase of meat in the stalls which were supplied by the temple, to the fraternal and commercial organizations to which a man must belong if he was to amount to anything in the community.

In their enthusiasm for the deed these people sometimes lose sight of a basic principle, i.e., that good deeds cannot ultimately spring from wrong motives. Consequently they may exhibit an impatience with theological subtleties.

An interesting and instructive parallel and contrast can be drawn between the churches at Thyatira and at Ephesus. In the former church there is love in plenty, and a laxity about doctrinal matters. In the latter there is stern insistence upon correct belief, but a constantly diminishing love vitiates the life of the church. In the former a too-slight concern for theology opens the door to excesses of sensuality and to false interpretations of the faith, which mark the church for destruction upon the rock of worldliness. In the latter, too little concern for people puts the church in danger of defeat because it puts more trust in doctrinal pronouncements and formulas than in the regenerative power of God. Both of these errors are deadly. And lest we should feel more inclined toward the Thyatirans, with their warm-hearted love and their record of mounting deeds of mercy and charity, it is well to recall the statement of Epiphanius that the church at Thyatira early became a center of Montanism.[1] Moreover, according to a statement of the Alogi, the Thyatiran church had ceased to exist toward the close of the second century.

The situation at Thyatira was essentially the same as at Pergamum: a sectarian party was unduly tolerated. The danger was not so much external as internal. It was not the

> cult of the emperor nor the cults of the pagan deities, the condition of membership in which was confessedly willingness to take part in the worship prescribed in each case, but the trade guilds which formed the problem in Thyatira.[2]

1. Article, "Thyatira", Hastings Dictionary of the Bible, Volume IV, p. 132.

The objection was on two general counts. In the first place, the unifying bond which held the guild together was the common meal in which all partook. The idea of brotherhood being validated by a common meal is an ancient idea, and the guild members ate and drank in fellowship with each other through the symbolism of such a meal. Of it Ramsay says,

> There can be no doubt that the ceremonial was similar to that of the Mysteries, and was of the nature of a sacrament or religious consecration of the common tie, yet no direct evidence can be given, or is likely ever to be found. But the indirect evidence seems conclusive.[1]

The brotherhood was held together by service to a common deity, one of the pagan gods. This god was its patron, its head, its center of fellowship and object of worship. In society as it was then constituted membership in a guild could not be dissociated from idolatry. Membership ipso facto implied a more or less idolatrous worship. To illustrate, there is the record of an honor being granted by a dyers' guild to the priest of the ancestral hero, Tyrimnaios. It is very possible that this was the guild to which Lydia belonged who is mentioned in Acts 16. To members of the guilds who became Christians, it was a real question what should be their attitudes to such pagan activities of the guild.

This was a problem of the first magnitude, affecting the whole life of the Christian who was involved, and the lives of his family as well. Acquiescence in the idolatrous homage to the pagan god which was an essential portion of the guild ceremony would compromise his conscience. Refusal to acquiesce would mean expulsion from the guild, with its consequent economic penalties, to say nothing of disrupted personal and social relationships.

But there was a second Christian objection, to the guilds, more clear cut than the first. To the charge of idolatrous worship, it was possible

to answer plausibly that since Christians recognized that there was but one God, no ceremony involving idols could possibly be worship. It was simply a gesture of respect, a social convenience, but the Christian guild-member was not worshipping, since he knew the object of such "worship" to be but a figment of imagination. The second objection was simply that the celebration of the common meal was ordinarily held amid surroundings of revelry and licentiousness of such a degraded character that no Christian could, in good conscience, participate in them. The morality of the Graeco-Roman world was none too strict at its best, and ceremonial occasions were seized upon as giving good opportunity and license for the indulgence of all manner of lustful and unclean conduct. At the guild ceremonies gluttony, drunkenness, and sexual excesses and aberrations were the common and accepted practice. Objection to this kind of conduct could not so easily be dismissed by Christians as could objection to the elements of pagan worship in guild ceremony. Licentious conduct was clearly contrary to the tenets of regular Christian belief and practice. But, clear cut as this moral issue may appear to us, there was a significant difference of opinion among the Christians of Thyatira. It is this conflict which is the moral hinge of the letter to this church.

Considering all the good qualities of the guilds, it was a serious question whether the Christians should cut themselves off altogether from them. One influential woman, representing what seems to have been the majority opinion, declared that Christians could conscientiously continue in the practices and duties which were the framework of the guild ceremonies. Since this woman called herself a prophetess, and was widely considered so, she was given a respectful hearing, and much weight was attached to her words. It is to this woman that John addresses his sternest words of condemnation.

1. There is, of course, the possibility that by happy coincidence her name may actually have been Jezebel.

2. There is a degree of parallelism here with the modern state-Shinto of Japan.

"That woman Jezebel" is his term for her, which connects her by symbol with one of the most remarkable personages of the Old Testament.[1]

The story of this strong-willed and wicked consort of Ahab, King of Israel, is recorded in I Kings 16 - 22. When Ahab came to the throne of Israel, he followed the practice of consolidating his position with neighboring principalities and kingdoms through marriage-alliances with their princesses. This practice was a common instrument of foreign policy of the times. What was uncommon, in this case, was the quality of the woman who became Ahab's queen.

Jezebel was the daughter of Ethbaal, King of Sidon, and an ardent devotee of the Baal of the Sidonians. When she came to Israel as the bride of Ahab, she brought with her a retinue of priests of the cult, who performed rituals, and offered sacrifices peculiar to the cult of the Baal while living at the court of Israel under her sponsorship and protection. It was not long before she had persuaded her royal husband to share in the worship, and to give allegiance to the Baal. Thus Ahab became more actively idolatrous than were his predecessors upon the throne. True, they had not pulled down the golden calves which Jeroboam had erected, but there was a certain casualness about those images; they were connected with an old tradition. Jeroboam had erected them at the northern and southern boundaries of his kingdom, and the worship which took place at these shrines probably had something of the element of patriotism in it as well as the element of religion.[2] The prophets, to be sure, recognized them for what they were, and would speak outsharply against them from time to time, but to the common people there was nothing out of the ordinary about the golden calves.

There was, however, something decidedly extraordinary in the fact of their king taking part in the worship of a foreign Baal.

There was probably a degree of syncretism in the religion of the day among the Hebrews. The gods of the land, the ancient Canaanean divinities, did unquestionably influence forms of the worship of Jehovah, and we cannot, from this far-distant point in time, begin to extricate and disentangle all of the elements of baal-worship from the purer Hebrew worship. But again, the religious situation in the Israel of Ahab and Jezebel was that the baals had become more or less domesticated within the framework of Jehovah worship.

In many respects that ancient religious situation was parallel to our own celebration of Easter. Our holy day, the resurrection day, has about it a mixed framework of ideas taken from the old Teutonic spring myths and the ancient Jewish passover. This framework influences, to a greater or lesser degree, the form of our celebration of Easter, but does not necessarily destroy our consciousness that what we celebrate is the Resurrection of our Lord. We must exercise constant vigilance lest this framework of other-than-Christian ideas should make us forgetful of the central reality of Easter. But we do not seriously consider ourselves to be idolators because the myth of the easter rabbit has its place on the fringes of our thought about Easter.

The situation would be much different if the Easter rabbit should suddenly take the center of the stage, or be replaced by some mythical deity from a pagan culture which would so dominate our observance of the Day of Resurrection that Jesus should no longer be the central figure, and the inner significance of the day should radically change.

Ahab's conversion to Baal-worship radically altered the religious situation of Israel. Jehovah-worship, impure and infected with syncretism as it had been, had nevertheless held the center of the religious stage. But with the advent of Jezebel and her sinister influence over the king, the worship of the Sidonian Baal moved into the central place. The city of Samaria soon boasted a "house of Baal" in which was the high altar before which Ahab and his bewitching wife worshipped and offered sacrifices. Before this altar, too, took place all of the disgusting and impure rites which surrounded the cult of the baals, fertility and agricultural deities, all.

Such was the historical Jezebel, and the place she held in Hebrew history: a strong-willed and determined woman, who, in her own interest, wove round the king of Israel the influence of Baalism which destroyed in him whatever sense of honor and loyalty to the God of his fathers might yet have lived. Having led him to the altar of Baal, she found it increasingly easy to lead him further into uncleanness of life and motive.

To the Thyatirans the Apocalyptist says, You have a woman among you who is truly a daughter of Jezebel. She is deluding you, leading you to foreign, idolatrous altars through meats which have been sacrificed to idols, and thus weakening your influence upon others who cannot understand that for us Christians meat is meat and idols are but wood and stone. Worse, you are allowing her to bring you into the practice of the rites associated with idolatry: fornication, sexual misconduct and irregularity. She is a Jezebel indeed, in her influence over you, and you must cast her out.

This was a difficult matter for the Christians of Thyatira, which city,

> owing to the fact that it was above all things a city of commerce, abounded in business guilds....this is what made the Nicolaitans doctrine so acceptable to the Church in this city....against the conduct of the Nicolaitans the Church in Ephesus had openly declared itself

1. Charles, R. H., "The Revelation of St. John", Volume I, pp. 69, 70.

> (ii. 6); but no such declaration had as yet emanated from the Church in Thyatira. Owing to the business and social interests of its members it was too ready to accept any principle that would justify their membership in the city guilds. Hence it withheld its testimony against an influential woman who had long (21) and notoriously (23) advocated the principles of the Nicolaitans and yet enjoyed the membership of the church.[1]

In Thyatira we see an example of a very early stage in the development of a Christian social philosophy. Relationships between the churches and their pagan matrix had not yet been settled. True, Paul had clearly stated in I Corinthians 10:15 - 22 that Christians were to abastain from idol-sacrificed meats, but in somewhat general terms which had not yet become the standard for all the churches. In the larger metropolitan centers, as Ephesus, the decision of the church might already be fixed, but the official position of the church had not yet won acceptance in the outlying districts. It was a complex, knotty, and difficult problem, as it remains today, this matter of participation in a pagan society.

There has been some difference of opinion among commentators as to how "the woman Jezebel" ought to be interpreted. Is she a woman, or merely a personalized tendency toward heresy? If she is a woman or a party, does she exist within the church or outside of it? It is all but self-evident, considering the terms in which the Apocalyptist speaks of her, that he had in mind a real person. The whole tone of the address is of that sort. And, if a woman, what woman?

Schürer has put forth a very attractive suggestion. As has been set forth above, Thyatira was the seat of a shrine of the Oriental Sibyl Sambathe. That being the case, should we not at least suspect, he asks, whether the priestess of this shrine ought to be considered to be the "Jezebel" of the letter. But this hypothesis must be put aside. The

1. Held by C. A. A. Scott, Düsterdieck, Charles, Kiddle, Trench, et al.

2. But see Note at the end of this section on Ramsay's more tolerant view.

letter clearly indicates that the woman was a member of the Christian community, one who had a large influence upon the other members of the church. It is impossible to think that a heathen prophetess would have been given credence, let alone a place of authority, within the fellowship of the church.

The best interpretation[1] is that "Jezebel" was a woman member of the Thyatiran church, able, influential, determined, and committed to the idea of a fairly wide latitude in matters involving community participation.[2] For this latter reason John the Apocalyptist opposed her teaching, likening her to another forceful, strong-minded,debased and debasing woman from the past of his people.

Those who were her followers, or who had come under her influence in appreciable degree, John castigated severly. Unless repentance from her works were forthcoming tribulation and pestilence would follow to punish those who walked in the ways of her wickedness. For every one receives from God in strict accordance with his works. This fundamental spiritual law is reiterated here, as it is throughout the Apocalypse.

But there were others in Thyatira who had not fallen under the sway of the "prophetess". These did not have this teaching, nor did they know what the woman's devotees called "the deep things of Satan." These stedfast folk John did not wish to burden further. It was enough for them merely to hold fast, to remain constant.

Of the "deep things of Satan", two general interpretations are held. Both are forceful arguments. According to the first view, the deep things which were offered to adherents of this teaching were offered in the name of God. This was indeed the pretension of the Gnostics. They always claimed to see more deeply into the real nature of things than others did.

1. Matthew 6:23.

2. Scott, C. A. A., "Revelation", pp. 148, 149.

Thus their teaching had more than a touch of the esoteric about it. And it may be that the "woman Jezebel" taught her disciples that what she showed them was the truth about God. But John would recognize the speciousness of such a claim. He would see how wicked and wrong were the tenets of this teaching. Hence, what to the prophetess and her followers were the "deep things of God", he declared to be the "deep things of Satan." This is a working out in practice of a dictum of Jesus. The Lord had said, "If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is the darkness."[1] Again he had spoken of the similar confusion of moral worth which afflicts people when they have completely lost their moral balance, so that what is good they call evil, and the evil good.

By the second interpretation, using a typical Antinomian idea, the prophetess would have urged participation in all of the pagan rites of the city on the ground that "all things are yours", or some equally misleading interpretation of a New Testament dictum. Participation in these heathen ceremonies would be a matter of moral indifference, since the inner man, the "spiritual " man, was well aware that they had no significance, and, in any case, what the body did could not affect the spirit.

Of these interpretations, the first is a bit more probable. At any rate, it certainly was quite in the manner of the Gnostics to

> insist on their knowledge of mysteries (γνῶσις) as an indispensable addition to, or even substitute for, faith, and also to boast of their power to penetrate into the deep and hidden things of Nature and God.[2]

But it is difficult, and perhaps not necessary, to judge which is the stronger view. To those of Thyatira who do not hold the evil doctrine, or to such of those as would repent of it, the Apocalyptist promised participation in the Messianic rule of Christ. The language of the

1. Revelation 2:26, 27.

2. So Charles, "The Revelation of St. John", Volume I, p. 77.

3. "Revelation", p. 149.

promise[1] is a free translation of the second Psalm, verse eight. To hear that the "ruling of the nations with a rod of iron," their "shattering to pieces as pottery vessels," is promised to those who keep the commands of God and overcome, is almost shocking news to our ears, and surely distasteful. Yet it must be said that in the sharp black and white ethics of the earliest Christian century the pagan world stood out dark and evil as the pit, and must surely be destroyed if it could not first be converted. Only so could God's kingdom come in its purity and power.

The promise that the morning star will be given to the one who overcomes is intended to convey the gift by Christ, of himself and of his glory. The commentators differ here, some declaring it is Christ who is to be theirs.[2] Others, as Scott think that the morning star is

> probably intended to indicate the freshness and the beauty of the glory with which the redeemed are to be clothed. The glory of the Lord is to be the glory also of His saints (cf. 2 Cor. iii. 18).[3]

Actually, there is little to choose between the two points of view, and they can be conveniently and legitimately combined into one. For when Christ Himself is the gift to men, they will assuredly be clothed in beauty and glory. Kiddle's contention that the promise is addressed alone to the martyrs is part of his overdrawn case which would make the martyr central in the thought of the Apocalypse. That martyrdom is possible is a continuous fact of the background of Revelation, but Kiddle's case seems not to be proved. In the case of some of the churches, persecution does not enter as an explicit fact. Yet promises are made to the members of these churches, "who overcome." The overcoming would seem to be a stedfast refusal to apostasize under any temptation, no matter what its nature.

1. "The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia", pp. 338 - 353.

2. Ramsay, W. M., "The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia", p. 350.

NOTE:

RAMSAY'S VIEW OF "JEZEBEL" [1]

Ramsay takes a more tolerant view of "Jezebel" than do other commentators. It is his opinion that she was a "very worthy, active, and managing, but utterly mistaken lady." Her mistake lay in supposing that the Antinomian principles were, in effect, part of the fabric of organized society. In order to maintain that fabric unbroken, in order to keep one's place in his social orbit, in order to refrain from becoming misanthropic, and in order to keep oneself free from the charge of self-righteousness and self-conceit, it was right and proper to acquiesce in social practices, even if one, as a Christian, happened to disagree with them. Over a long period of time this had apparently been the point of view of the prophetess, even though circumstances must have shown again and again the folly of compromising with Antinomianism. The Apocalyptist saw that she was

> fumbling about with questions which she was quite incapable of comprehending, full of complacent satisfaction with her superficial views as to the "fairness" and reasonableness of allowing the poor to profit by those quite praiseworthy associations which did so much good, --and misusing her influence, acquired by good works and persuasive speaking, to lead her fellow-Christians astray.[2]

E. THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT SARDIS
Revelation 3:1 - 6

> And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars: I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and thou art dead. Be thou watchful, and establish the things that remain, which were ready to die: for I have found no works of thine perfected before my God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and didst hear; and keep it, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. But thou hast a few names in Sardis that did not defile their garments: and they shall walk with me in white; for they are worthy. He that overcometh shall thus be arrayed in white garments; and I will in no wise blot his name out of the book of life, and I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches.

Sardis, some thirty miles to the southeast of Thyatira, was, at the time of the Apocalypse, the perfect example of decayed grandeur. Built upon a mountainous plateau, it was a perfect fortress city, easily accessible only from the south. In the early days of its history it had been the capital of the strong kingdom of Lydia, of which the famous Croesus had once been king. For all its strength of geographical position, it had twice been conquered, once by Cyrus, and again three centuries later by Antiochus the Great. Under the Romans it was again emerging into some prominence, but it still presented the melancholy spectacle of a city which had once been great, and was now irrevocably decayed. In 17 A. D. it was all but destroyed by a great earthquake, but was quickly restored through the generosity of Tiberius, who remitted all of its taxes for a period of five years, and in addition contributed 10,000,000 sesterces toward its rebuilding.

The chief cult of the city was that of Cybele, the ruins of whose temple are still to be seen on the ancient site. The worship of this deity was in all probability of the usual adoration-of-nature type, so common to the general geographical region, but more of the Maiden-Proserpine sort than the

1. "The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia", p. 363.

Mother-Demeter sort, according to Ramsay.[1]

Sardis had long been recognized as a center of luxury and of licentious living. It was inevitable that any religious group which tried to live a life of purity and morality within it would have a difficult time of it.

And thus, indeed, it proved. The letter opens with a most severe blast at the church. The One who holds the seven stars, He who has the Seven Spirits, i.e., the one who knows the churches through and through, who is constantly among them to encourage and sustain, the one who understands their needs and problems, charges the church with being dead, while having the reputation of being alive. It is a serious situation, yet hardly a unique one. Dependence upon past glories is a constant temptation to any group with a history of magnificence and grandeur.

To no other one of the seven churches are words of such unqualified severity spoken. The Sardian Christians have, as a whole, nothing to commend them to Christ. Their church possessed a semblance of life. It was, no doubt, carrying out all of the formal functions of a church, going through the motions, observing the ceremonies, acting on the surface like a church, yet so shot through with the corrupt life of the city that all of the bustle of activity was but sham and pretense. To the outside world, the church might appear to be very much alive, but to the brooding spirit of Christ, its imminent death was clearly apparent. Reputation is one thing. True inner character is another. The Sardis church possessed the first. It was fatally lacking in the latter.

The injunction in verse two to be watchful must have sounded a familiar and ominous note in the ears of the Sardian Christians. Their city in time past had been a formidable fortress, placed upon a bluff so precipitous on all sides, save the south, that a successful attack could be mounted

1. "The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia", p. 360.

only from that direction. No army could successfully scale the steep cliffs on the other three sides. That is, no army could do it if the most rudimentary conditions of watchfulness were maintained. Yet the city had twice been captured, and in the same manner. Ramsay tells us that

> the rock of the acropolis is of a coarse and friable conglomerate, which melts away gradually under the influence of the atmosphere. It always preserves an almost perpendicular face, but at times an oblique crack develops in the rock wall, and permits a bold climber to work his way up.[1]

Such a condition would have been of little avail had the inhabitants of Sardis kept a close watch upon the three steep sides, for even the most adept mountain climber would have been helpless under a shower of rocks from above as he strove to scale the steep heights. But apparently no such watch was kept, and Cyrus' army came upon the surprised city like a "thief in the night." Moreover, history repeated itself, and the conquest of Antiochus the Great was accomplished by the daring cliff-scaling feat of one Lagoras, who had been brought up on mountain climbing in his native Crete. The injunction to watch, therefore had historical overtones to the Sardians. They had examples in the fate of their own city to show them the peril of a too-easy assurance, without constant watchfulness.

The church is exhorted to watch in the matter of its remaining life, which was at the point of death, and in the matter of its works which were all incomplete and partial. It is significant that there is nothing said in the letter about any sort of persecution. The Jews were not active in opposition to this church, nor did the officials of the Roman emperor-cult cause any trouble. The argument from silence is scarcely conclusive, but surely we are entitled to speculate whether this absence of opposition might not have grown out of the fact that the church had been at pains to walk so circumspect and innocuous a pathway as to rob it of any power and

1. Kiddle, Martin. "The Revelation of St. John", p. 45.

2. Revelation 3:5.

zeal, and to render it impotent and unimportant as an adversary to paganism. It is a terrible thing for any church to be told that none of its work has come to a satisfactory end. And

> when we remember what "complete" fulfilment of the Christian life meant to the Christians of Smyrna, and, indeed, at what bitter cost the Ephesian church won the praise which qualified the charges laid on her, we shall better understand what John demanded of the church at Sardis.[1]

The exhortation to remember is a call to get back to the early simplicity and enthusiasm which must have marked the early life of this, as of every church. The parallel to the Ephesian situation is marked. In Ephesus, too, things had gone wrong after a good start. There the problem had been a decline in love brought about by a fanatical zeal for orthodoxy. Here the difficulty was that too accomodating a temper had robbed the church of any zeal at all, and made it a shell of a church, without any real inner substance.

But even in Sardis all is not lost. There are still "a few names" in the church which are pure; still a few souls who have not fallen into the general corruption, but have walked in the true Christian way. Yet for the church as a whole there seems to be no hope. Its life as an organized body is about finished. The acids of corruption have eaten too deeply into its life for the church to recover. These individuals who did not "defile their garments" shall have the seal of their purity placed upon them: "they shall walk with me (Christ) in white: for they are worthy."[2] And their names shall not be blotted out of the book of life. But as for the rest, the race is over. No longer shall a church so devoid of spiritual vitality and real Christian meaning continue to seem to be what it is not.

The idea of the book of life

1. Scott, C. A. A., "Revelation", p. 151.

> plays a great part in Jewish apocalyptic literature, in which it is developed to include the deeds as well as the names of God's people in the heavenly record.[1]

To be blotted out of this book meant to be rejected by God, to be considered unworthy of continue fellowship with him. Now, nowhere in the letter before us is the explicit statement made that the Sardians shall have that fate. But the presumption is made even stronger by indirection, for in chapter three, verse five, the statement is made that "he that overcometh shall thus be arrayed in white garements; and I will in no wise blot his name out of the book of life." The natural reading of the passage places emphasis upon the pronoun "his". But if the conqueror's name shall not be blotted out, there is strong inference that some one's name will be so blotted. Who is he but the one who does <u>not</u> conquer, the one who falls by the wayside, victim of the pressure of society and of his own desire to walk in the middle of the road at the expense of his integrity and Christian witness?

The one who overcomes shall have also the greatest of all rewards, viz. be acknowledged before the Father of all as a faithful follower of the Lamb, and thus as a sharer of His power and authority.

1. Cf. Footnote No. 3, p. 80.

F. THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT PHILADELPHIA
Revelation 3:7 - 13

> And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth and none shall shut, and that shutteth and none openeth: I know thy works (behold, I have set before thee a door opened, which none can shut), that thou hast a little power, and didst keep my word, and didst not deny my name. Behold, I give of the synagogue of Satan, of them that say they are Jews, and they are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee. Because thou didst keep the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of trial, that hour which is to come upon the whole world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. I come quickly: hold fast that which thou hast, that no one take thy crown; He that overcometh, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go out thence no more: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God, and mine own new name. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches.

Philadelphia was the most recently founded of the seven cities, having been established by Attalus II Philadelphus sometime between 189 and 138 B. C. This Attalus was the King of the Pergamenian kingdom, his title Philadelphus being in consequence of his loyalty toward his brother Eumenes, who was his predecessor. Philadelphia was, by the time of the Apocalypse, an important, rich city. Located some twenty-eight miles south-east from Sardis, it stood on the main trade route from the cities of northern Phrygia to the Aegean Sea. Its location made it the logical gateway to the eastern country, which probably accounts for the reference to the "opened door" in the letter.

Like Sardis, and other Asian cities, Philadelphia suffered greatly from the devastating earthquake of 17 A. D. Also like Sardis, it was aided to recover from the damage by a grant from the emperor Tiberius. For a time following this grant the city was called Neokaisereia in honor of the emperor.

1. Article, "Philadelphia", Hastings Dictionary of the Bible, Volume III, p. 831.

2. Ramsay, W. M., "The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia", p. 400.

Little is known of the history and circumstances of the city. Accordingly any relation that there might be between the secular history of Philadelphia and the terms of the letter which John addresses to it, is veiled in mystery. Some of the letters make clear and marked references to the history of the towns in which the churches addressed were located. Yet we should probably not find much reference anyway, for, as Ramsay reminds us,

> it is chiefly the faults which are associated with the local circumstances, and which derive light therefrom. Insofar as a church attained Christian purity, its character rises to a higher plane; insofar as it degenerates from that high level, it becomes affected by its earthly surroundings. Now the two churches which are addressed in terms of almost unmingled praise are Smyrna and Philadelphia; and in these two addresses we find least reference to local history and situation.[1]

In the light of the praise which is meted out to this church in the Apocalypse, the subsequent history of the city is revealing. With the utmost hereism it resisted the advances of the Turks. In the fourteenth century, it stood all but alone as a self-governing Christian city in a Turkish land. Twice it was dreadfully beseiged, being rescued in both cases in the nick of time. Finally at the end of the century, abandoned by the Empire, it succumbed to a joint expedition of Turks and Byzantines, but not before

> it displayed all the noble qualities of endurance, truth and steadfastness, which are attributed to it in the letter of St. John, amid the ever-threatening danger.[2]

At the outset we should notice the similarity between the letter now under consideration, and that to the church at Smyrna. Each of these two churches is praised with much less reserve than are any of the other five. In each of them, also, the character of the one who writes to the church is described in terms which are an accurate reflection of the character of the church. Thus Smyrna is addressed by the one who "was

1. Ramsay, W. M., "The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia", p. 402.

2. Ad. Phil., 3, 5, 10.

3. Scott, C. A. A., "Revelation", p. 152.

dead and lived", in anticipation of the "suffering unto death" which the writer sees as the lot of the Smyrneans. Philadelphia, likewise, is here addressed by the one who is "holy, he that is true." In the light of the letter, this same characterization can be made of the church, which "kept my word, and did not deny my name." But of none of the other churches can it be safely said that the characterizations of speaker and church are synonymous:

> In addressing Ephesus and Pergamum and Thyatira the writer speaks as holding that position and authority and power, which they by their conduct are losing. The writer to Sardis occupies the honourable position which Sardis has lost beyond hope of recovery. The writer to Laodicea is faithful and true, addressing a Church which is reproached for its irresolution and want of genuineness.[1]

The church at Smyrna counted itself poor, that at Philadelphia knows it has but a little power. Both churches had to contend with a strong and cantankerous Jewish opposition. And finally, both are promised rewards, not for a remnant of the Church, as in the other cities, but for the Church itself.

The satisfactory quality of the Christian li e of the Church at Philadelphia receives confirmation in the letter which Ignatius wrote to the church.[2]

With the very form of address, John sounds a note of joy and confidence in the church. It is "he that is holy, he that is true" who addresses the Christians. Of the latter word, Scott reminds us that it carries with it the idea of genuineness.[3] Christ holds David's keys, and deals decisively with locks and doors. It is he who has put the Philadelphians in a position of opportunity, he who has opened the door for them into boundless development and Christian witness. And it is he who decrees that the opportunity shall not pass from them.

Philadelphia possessed the priceless gift of a geographical location which assured it of a place of importance to the regions to the east of it. In a sense it was the gateway to the central part of Asia, that is to say, the bulk of the region of Phrygia. To the hinterland it served as the fountainhead of commerce, culture, government, and all the processes of life. No wonder the Apocalyptist saw its situation as packed with opportunity. The faith of the Christians could so easily press on into that waiting countryside with the gospel of Christ. Missionary activity should be richly productive. Indeed, it is very possible that the Philadelphian church had already availed herself of the opportunity. For it was not an opening door. It stood open, as it had done for some time, and all that was needed was the Christian resolution and zeal to pass through and inherit the promise of the fields white unto harvest.

The church was not a powerful one. No doubt the churches in the great metropolitan centers of the commercial sea-coast outstripped it both in numbers and in wealth. It is described here as having a "little power." Its works are not to be compared to the greater doings of other bodies. But this in no wise diminishes its importance to the future of the faith.

Faithfulness is a better measure of what a group can be expected to produce than is the latent ability of the group. And the Philadelphians had already proved their faithfulness. In times of testing they had not denied the name of the Lord, but had kept stedfast to their simple, courageous witness for the sake of the Word.

The conflict in Philadelphia was based upon Jewish opposition to the faith. The local synagogue had been the headquarters of persecution, and had become, through its attacks upon the Christians, a veritable agent of Satan himself. Jews by blood, these folk had, by their actions, proved themselves unworthy of the honorable name which had for so long stood for

strict morality, the only thorough-going monotheism of its time, and a social order erected upon the two foregoing principles.

The result and by-product of stedfastness in the hour of trial is a relationship with Christ which insures that He will keep the stedfast ones safe in the time of persecution. We should not read into this passage any guarantee of physical safety when the peril comes. What we can understand is this, that having kept the Word and the Name in the struggle with the Jews, the Christians are ready to move against the might of Rome and the assaults of its paganism with undiminished zeal, and with calm assurance. It is against the demonic attacks of the forces of spiritual wickedness that the Apocalyptist promises security in the sense of safety.

Whoever wins through triumphantly shall take up his place of usefulness and permanent service in the very temple of God Himself, that is, in the presence of the Almighty One. And not only shall that one be with God, but he shall belong to God as a possession, as a slave, as an inhabitant of God's eternal city. The mark of God shall be upon him, and the seal of the acceptance of Christ.

In the light of this, since the end of the present order is near at hand it is most necessary for the Christian to make sure that he will be a partaker in what shall hereafter come to pass, lest anyone should deprive him of his crown.

1. Charles, R. H., "The Revelation of St. John", Volume I, p. 93.

2. Ep. Ad Fam. iii. 5. 4.

F. THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT LAODICEA
Revelation 3:13 - 22

> And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God: I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot; I would thou wert cold or hot. So because thou art lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spew thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and have gotten riches, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art the wretched one and miserable and poor and blind and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold refined by fire, that thou mayest become rich; and white garments, that thou mayest clothe thyself, and that the shame of thy nakedness be not made manifest; and eye-salve to anoint thine eyes, that thou mayest see. As many as I love, I reprove and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. He that overcometh, I will give to him to sit down with me in my throne, as I also overcame, and sat down with my Father in his throne. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches.

This city was probably founded by Antiochus II in the middle years of the third century B. C., and named after his wife Laodike. It was located in the southern sector of the Lycus valley, about two miles from the river itself, on one of the low foothills fringing the valley. This location was most fortunate from the commercial point of view. The great road from the coast to the inner country led through the city, and three others roads converged and met in Laodicea,

> the first from the S. E. from Attaleia and Perga; the second from the N. W. from Sardis and Philadelphia (about 40 miles distant); and the third from the N. E. from Dorylaeum and northern Phrygia.[1]

So well connected a city was eminently qualified to be a center of commerce and trade. It is not surprising to discover from Cicero that it is in Laodicea that he proposes to cash in his bills of exchange drawn against the treasury,[2] for Laodicea was a recognized center of fiscal operations. Banking was a major factor in the development of the city, and through it

1. Ramsay, W. M., "The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia", p. 416.

Laodicea became rich and powerful. Indeed when the great earthquakes of 60 - 61 A. D. leveled the city, it did not apply for Imperial grants for reconstruction, but proudly bore its own expense, and did its own rebuilding.

Wool-growing and manufacture were important parts of the economy of the town.

> There was produced in the valley a valuable sort of wool, soft in texture and glossy black in color, which was widely esteemed. This wool was woven into garments of several kinds for home use and export trade. Small and cheap upper garments, called himatia, two kinds of birros (another sort of upper garment), one of native style and one in imitation of the manufactures of the Nervii, a tribe in French Flanders, and also tunics of several kinds, were made in Laodicea; and one species of the tunics, called trimita, was so famous that the city is styled Trimitaria in the lists of the Council of Chalcedon, A. D. 451, and in some other late documents.[1]

The secret of the black wool has been lost, though it persisted until comparatively recent times, and is one more example in the long list of lost practices, formulas, and methods whose vanishment has impoverished the modern world.

Some thirteen miles west of the city stood the temple of the Phrygian god Men Karou, the original pagan god of the valley peoples. This temple was the center of the religious and social life of the entire valley. In connection with the affairs of this temple, a famous medical school grew up, with its seat in the city, rather than at the temple. This school followed the curious medical theories of Herophilus, who believed that compound diseases required, for their cure, compound medicines, and who developed a whole catalogue of strange and exotic mixtures. The only medicine which is expressly mentioned in the ancient world as being Laodicean is a kind of ear-strengthening ointment made from the spice nard. Galen tells us that originally it was prepared only in Laodicea. But a medicine for the eyes was known, as Phrygian powder to Aristotle, and as a tablet made from

1. Cf. Footnote No. 3, p. 80.

2. Ramsay, W. M., "The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia", p. 422.

the Phrygian stone to Galen. Since Laodicea was the most widely known medical center in Phrygia, and, indeed, the only famous seat of medical lore in that area, it seems all but certain that this Phrygian powder was a product of the temple school.

Laodicea was a center of the Imperial cult, receiving the Neokorate[1] in the reign of Commodus, towards the close of the second century A. D., and through its widespread trading activities, had close relations with many of the other cities of Asia. Ramsay cites several cities with which it is represented on "alliance-coins": Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, many of the immediately neighboring cities, and some distant places, like Nikomedia and Perinthus.[2]

Laodicea is the commercial city par excellence: flexible enough to keep on good terms with its customers and patrons; without pronounced views of its own, which might give offence to others; tolerant of opposing notions; practical and full of common sense, the reward of which was the phenomenal material prosperity of the city and its people.

But these very colorless characteristics, this balanced and temperate disposition to please every one, to compromise, to evade a firm stand, brought the wrath and sarcasm of the Apocalyptist down upon the city. The virtues of success and money-making were nothing to him alongside the loss of strong and definitive character which was their accompaniment.

It is interesting for our study to note that this city, with no clearly marked character of its own, is addressed with more attention to its own inner nature and circumstance than any other of the Seven.

The proud boast of verse seventeen: I am rich, and have gotten riches, and have need of nothing, is an evident reminiscence of the city's proud refusal to claim government bounty after the earthquake of a generation

1. II Corinthians 12:10.

previous. The Laodiceans felt a little thrill of self-congratulation whenever they remembered that. It made them superior to other cities, that they, almost alone, had done their own building and carried their own financial burden.

Likewise the injunction of verse eighteen to buy from Christ white garments is a reference in a backhanded sort of way to the prevailing industry of black garments, as if the writer is showing the futility of a prosperity founded on purely commercial bases. It is a good thing, no doubt, to have a blackwool flock, or processing plant, but it is a better thing to have the white garments of purity and righteousness. The former without the latter give a security that is wholly illusory.

Still again, at the close of the eighteenth verse comes a reference to eyesalve which should be purchased from Christ, so that sight may be had. All the famed magic powders of the Phrygian medical school can do nothing for the spiritual vision, which alone can be had through the remedy of cleansing which is in Christ.

So, at the very points where it felt itself to be secure and sturdy, Laodicea's complacency is shaken by the Apocalyptist. He reminds us of Paul,[1] declaring that in the places of weakness real strength can be had, but that where one feels himself to be strong, he is almost sure to be weak.

The letter opens with a description of Christ in terms of truth and of His eternal significance. He is not one with whom it is possible to be neutral. And neutral is what the Laodicean Christians were trying to be. The result was nauseating to those who held the faith with tenacity and in the midst of persecution. So lukewarm were they that they had become an offense, to be spewed out of the midst of the Christian fellowship unless somehow they should learn the secret of a positive stand one way or the other. Indeed, says John, it would be better for them to be absolutely hostile to the gospel than to maintain the pose of benevolent neutrality.

1. Colossians 4:16.

If they cannot blow hot, would that they would blow cold.

The character ascribed to Christ in this opening passage has some very striking points of contact with His description in the Epistle to the Colossians. Colossae was but ten miles to the east of Laodicea, and when St. Paul wrote his epistle to the church in the former city, he enjoined that it should be passed on to the Christians in Laodicea, who in turn would give to the Colossians the letter which Paul had written to them.[1] The discussion of Charles is worth quoting at this point, to illustrate the similarities of thought:

> First of all, with ( ) we should compare Col. 1:18, (where ---the active principle in creation--- αἰτία , cause--- has the same meaning as in our text), and 1:15, πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως ("sovereign Lord over all creation by virtue of primogeniture"--Lightfoot). It is to be observed that πρωτότοκος bears the same meaning in our author in 1:5, πρωτότοκος τῶν νεκρῶν sovereign Lord of the dead" (i.e., the secondary meaning of πρωτότοκος). In Col. 1:18, πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν is not quite parallel owing to the presence of the ἐκ, which brings out the primary meaning of πρωτότοκος, i.e., priority in time.
> With 3:21 compare Col. 3:1, ( ). In our text the victors are to be seated on Christ's throne as he is seated on God's throne. In Col. 3:1, Christ is seated at the right hand of God, and the faithful are to sit with him in heavenly places. (Eph. 2:6).
> In 3:17 - 19 the self-complacency and self-satisfaction of the Laodiceans, arising in part, no doubt, from their great material wealth and prosperity as well as their intellectual advancement, are denounced, and they are exhorted to seek the true riches and the true wisdom which comes from a vision purged by the Great Physician. Cf. Col. 1:27, where the apostle emphasizes in contrast to their proud but baseless knowledge (2:8, 18, 23), "the riches of the glory of this mystery which is Christ in you", and 2:2, 3, where he declares that he strives for the Colossians and also for the Laodiceans that they may be brought unto "all riches of the full assurance of understanding," even "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden" in Christ. It is not un-

[1]

1. "The Revelation of St. John", Volume I, pp. 94, 95.

> reasonable to conclude from the above evidence that our author was acquainted directly or indirectly with St. Paul's Epistle to the Colossians. Possibly he was acquainted with St. Paul's lost Epistle to the Laodiceans, and was thereby influenced in his diction and his thought. There are no resemblances between the diction and thought of the other six letters and the Pauline Epistles--a matter worthy of consideration.[1]

After the description of Christ, the letter proceeds to the section mentioned above, in which those matters which to the Laodiceans were sources of pride are shown to be sources of weakness. The true strength of the Christian comes from his relation to Christ, says the Seer, not from external things like gold and fine raiment.

When these people think they are rich and thus have no need of any assistance they are in reality, says the Apocalyptist, wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked. Arrogance and pride of possession are the exact reverse of the humility which is the central and oft-despised Christian virtue. Real riches consist of gold of a purity not met with on earth, refined by fire, which melts all impurity away. Perhaps there is reference to martyrdom here, or perhaps it is merely a way of saying pictorially that earth's purity is impure alongside of heaven's.

The gold of the Laodicean banks cannot guarantee security nor can the herds and factories of the wool industry. You are too proud of your garments of black wool, said the Apocalyptist. Leave off, and get for yourselves the true protection of the white robes of purity and honorable life. Else you will become naked, spiritually, and shamed before all men.

All the vaunted remedies of the medical school cannot open the eyes afflicted with spiritual blindness, or help a myopic spirit to see more clearly. Remedy for that disease must come from a medicine which is not of the earth. This is available from Jesus, but from no other source.

This is a stern indictment indeed of the temper of a people which seems to have been much like our own temper in technological America. Then, as now, and there, as here, there was a strong predisposition to weigh and measure a successful life, or community, or church, in terms of its prosperity and its prudence in matters commercial. And this was not enough to keep the church safe. That seems to be clear.

Yet, if anyone shows signs of repentance for this worldliness of mind, there is waiting his pardon. Indeed, the Saviour is at the door, knocking, seeking entrance, promising that if he gains entrance, he will enter a fellowship relation with the one who gives Him hospitality. The punishment which may come upon Laodicea is designed to awaken reprentance, and is an indication of the love of God, seeking to win back his own, even if by chastening.

Finally, whosoever overcomes the evil will sit with his Saviour upon a throne, i.e., he will enter into spiritual dominion.

These closing phrases, from 3:19b onward, Ramsay conceives to be a kind of epilogue to the entire series of letters. He makes a strong case, based upon the unsuitability of these verses to the specialized nature of the Laodicean church. It is better, he feels, to consider the passage as directed to the attention of all the churches, and the promise of the entrance of the Christ, and the reign of the saints with him as being a general promise. It is tempting to adopt the point of view, even in the face of the fact that Ramsay stands seemingly alone in it. But one or two matters seem to militate against it.

For one thing there is the carefully designed form of the letters. If we grant this to be an epilogue, the symmetry of the closing pharases is broken here in the last of the series. The phrase, "he that hath

an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches"is the regular closing note of each of the preceding six. If here it is appended, not to the epistle itself, but to an epilogue, the sequence is destroyed.

Moreover, this breaks the letter to Laodicea off very abruptly, with no proper closing at all, while all the others have a distinct sense of well-roundedness about them.

It may be objected, in Ramsay's behalf, that the closing verses of the third chapter are supposed to do double duty, serving both as a climax to the letter, and as an epilogue to the series, and that thus any discrepancies may be explained. But on the whole, such objection seems unlikely. The internal integrity and structure of the letters seem to demand a similar treatment for this last one.

This letter to the Laodicean church is a sharp rebuke of indifference and unconcern about spiritual matters wherever that temper exists. No half-way measures of repentance are sufficient for complacent people. Only a thorough-going awakening to the claims of the Christ and to His ability to provide the only lasting satisfactions of life is enough to redeem complacent souls from destruction. Thus this letter speaks to a temper as old as Laodicea, as new as this present hour.

We have now investigated the subject matter of the letters to the Seven Churches. These letters are packed full of clear analysis of and wise counsel to the churches. John wrote of that whereof he knew. Wise leader that he was, he met the church of each city on ground with which it was familiar. References to a city's history, geography, culture, or religion would awaken an immediate response in the Christian citizens of that city. When spiritual lessons could be couched in terms related to the ordinary life and experiences of the people, a more immediate response to them would be forthcoming.

The letters to the Seven Churches are constructed in accordance with that principle. These brief messages abound in intimations of the common life. Each one speaks clearly and unmistakeably to a specific church set in a definite situation. But, so great is the Seer's genius and inspiration, each one also delineates a problem or attribute common to Christians in many churches and situations. Thus, the letters apply with devastating clarity and modernity to the Christian community of our day as well as to the churches of Asia in the first century A. D. They have the truly representative character which John himself intended they should have.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ETHICAL PROBLEMS OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES

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In the preceding chapter the material of the second and third chapters of the Apocalypse has been presented in some detail. The problems faced by each church have been delineated, the situation of the cities briefly described. Now, in this chapter, the task is to codify the problems of the churches into some sort of order, to see if there be any common thread or threads which might be described with reasonable accuracy as being a common ethical situation. Is there some ethical problem which faces the church in general, or do we have here to deal with a heterogeneous collation of situations which have nothing in common with each other?

To state the question in this form is really to presuppose an answer. For, earlier it has been demonstrated that the letters to the churches must be considered under two aspects: (1) as representing the conditions in the specific church under consideration, and (2) as representative of Christianity as a whole, the seven churches standing for the total Christian community of the time. If we consider the second aspect, it is not conceivable that the problems raised in connection with one church should not have overtones, at least, and probably close relationships with those raised in connection with the others.

As we examine the church situations one by one we shall attempt to relate them to each other, to show the main outlines of the common problems of the day, and the various means, more or less satisfactory, by which some resolution of those problems was reached.

The church at Ephesus was warmly praised, though with reservations. Faithfully, patiently standing for the truth, it had zealously contended

for the pure and undefiled gospel message. False teaching had no chance to get a foothold in Ephesus. The church was ardently awake to the dangers of apostasy, and vigorously combatted it wherever it might be found. Even when it had been hard for them to stand fast in the faith, the Ephesians had not wavered. But this rigid theological orthodoxy had had disastrous effects in ethical relationships among the people. To believe correctly had been the primary concern, to the neglect of other virtues. Love between the brethren, and love for God had decayed. The temper of the church had grown more and more censorious, until it became necessary for the Apocalyptist to predict the removal of the church if the situation remained unchanged and unremedied. The ethical problem lay in the imputation to others of motives which they did not have, and of making judgments of character upon the basis of theological correctness alone. This imputation resulted in wrong evaluation of the worth and value of other points of view, and brought about a good deal of dissension and unjust treatment of the dissident minority.

One of the great concerns of the churches in the period of the Apocalypse was how to deal with false teaching, purporting to be in the name and spirit of Christ, but in reality having no central loyalty to Him. The Ephesians represented one of the prevailing attitudes toward false teaching. Contrast their zeal with the lukewarmness of the Laodiceans, who did not care one way or the other about anything of spiritual import, being far too ready to steer a middle course of compromise, and unwilling to take a positive stand. Compare the attitude of the Thyatirans, which was one of warm-hearted and increasing love, but inclined to be lax about inquiring into the nature of the teaching of some of its prominent members. Thus the church at Thyatira harbored in

its midst false teachers of note and ability, who corrupted the purity and soundness of the Christian faith. They counseled compromise with pagan society to a degree impossible if the real significance of Christianity were to be maintained. Note the difference between the attitudes of the Ephesians and the Sardian Christians. At Sardis decay of Christian conviction and life had gone so far that the church lived on its reputation alone, and was like the Laodicean church, indifferent to the claims of rival teachings.

In the struggle to maintain the Christian faith pure and unspotted, the grave problem was to balance zeal with charity, orthodoxy with love, so that both received due emphasis, and neither overpowered the other. And this problem was ethical in its essence, for if zeal became rampant, loving relationships between people became first difficult, then impossible, and injustice and hate entered the hunt for heresy. If love and warmheartedness became the sole measure of a church, it was likely to be too ready to excuse without valid reason the eccentricities and heresies of its members, in short, to be sentimental in its approach to the problems of belief. In a social order so sensual and pagan as was that of Asia Minor in the first century, the inevitable outcome of a soft attitude toward matters of defective belief was corruption and licentious practice based upon the false beliefs. It was, therefore, imperative that the tension be maintained between a rigid orthodoxy on the one hand, and the gentler ministries of affection and warm-heartedness upon the other, and to do so without falling into an attitude which attached no importance to it one way or the other.

The church at Smyrna shares with that at Philadelphia the distinction of receiving no blame at all, but only praise for its conduct in a

1. Revelation 2:9.

difficult situation. This church was poor in the world's goods, but had faced persecution triumphantly. It had done its work loyally, and was constantly facing the hostility of a militant community of Jews. The church at Smyrna was constantly embarrassed and harrassed by this "synagogue of Satan."[1]

Moreover, further persecution was imminent, though it was destined to be of short duration. But for all its poverty and poor situation the Smyrnean church was triumphant, for it had learned how to meet its problems and to overcome them.

Probably the matter of greatest ethical concern was the situation regarding the Jewish persecution of the Christians. John seems to have had some knowledge of the sort of thing which had been going on, and he described the Jews as being agents of the devil himself. Nothing was too mean for them to stoop to, in order to put the church in an unfavorable light.

To be thus dealt with is one of the sternest tests of character and life which can come to an individual or group. All the natural instincts are to repay the antagonist in his own coin. It is a real challenge to the personal character and ethical sense of a people to be reviled and to revile not. But the Smyrneans had attained it. They had learned how to let the Jews do their worse without retaliation. That these Christians would be rewarded was, therefore, assured.

The church at Philadelphia had faced the identical problem, i.e., an insurgent Jewish community which made life miserable for the Christians. It would appear from the form of statement made to the Philadelphians that they had not been so successful in overcoming their natural resentment as had the Smyrneans. John promises them that the Jews, now so vindictive and antagonistic, will yet come to realize that God's love is toward the Christians. It is as if the apocalyptist were saying,

1. Revelation 2:13.

"Do not be too discouraged. Things will reverse themselves after a while, and your persecutors will one day come to their senses." Apparently the Seer felt that a definitely encouraging word was necessary.

This problem of patient dealing with an intransigent and overweening opponent is, like the first problem of balancing zeal with love, preeminently a problem of the interior furnishing of life itself. Thus it is an ethical problem on the purely personal level, though with quite far-reaching results. The quality of Christian lives more than any one other influence made the difference between the success and failure of the Christian mission in the early days.

When we turn to the problems of the church at Pergamum, we discover that it faced an environmental difficulty of the greatest magnitude. It was located in the city which was the center of emperor worship for the whole province of Asia, "where Satan's throne is"[1] and was thus subject both to close scrutiny and certain persecution by the priests of the imperial cult. In their own way, the Christians at Pergamum were as zealous as those at Ephesus. While the Ephesians expressed their faith in a vigorous orthodoxy, the Pergamenians expressed theirs in a steadfast resistance to whatever pressure the emperor-worshippers could bring to bear upon them. That this pressure had gone beyond the mere application of social strictures is evident from the statement that one Antipas had been slain for his faith, presumably, from the words, "where Satan dwelleth", at the altar of the emperor. The church at Pergamum, however, had not been so successful in dealing with its own internal problems as with the external ones. There existed in the church a party, probably antinomian in spirit, which John identifies as being like the Balaam of the Old Testament. According to Josephus

1. "thou hast some that hold the teaching of Balaam." Revelation 2:14.

and to Jewish tradition, this Balaam had betrayed his own people to King Balak for gold. These Antinomians, spiritual kinsmen of the Nicolaitans and Jezebelites of the Ephesian and Thyatiran letters, taught a disregard of law which resulted in the breakdown of moral scruples and the beginning of licentiousness.

This Antinomian party was tolerated in the church at Pergamum, although the language of the letter does not justify belief that it was the prevailing group.[1] The Pergamum church stood in the middle ground, with respect to Antinomianism. Three times the Antinomians are mentioned in the letters to the Seven Churches. In one church, Ephesus, they were unhesitatingly and thoroughly repudiated by the church as a whole, and their belief could gain no foothold. In the church at Pergamum they were an accepted party of the church, not vigorous enough to carry the day, but counted as a respectable element of the life of the church and exerting a certain influence upon its thought and practice. The third mention of Antinomianism, in the letter to the Thyatirans, is of a more serious nature. Here the Antinomian influence seems to have been the decisive one, and the life of the entire church was affected, if not indeed determined, by the power of a prophetess, the "woman Jezebel," who was followed by the majority of the church members.

It is not hard to see why there should have been such a vogue for the teaching of these Antinomians. The churches of Asia were not far removed from paganism: a generation at most. They lived in the midst of a brilliant and long established Hellenistic culture, sensual, rationalistic in temper, tolerant in belief. Assuredly there was no wish on the part of the Christian community to cut itself off from intercourse of all sorts with the larger pagan community in which the church found

itself. There was no hint yet of isolationism or asceticism within the church. It remained a church in the world, seeking to come to terms with the culture and civilization in which it lived.

The question which it faced was, how to effect rapport with the world. How far could Christians pursue their old life, maintain their old associations, and count themselves a part of the community spirit without losing, or at least endangering, the faith which they had embraced. Another question, of equal moment, and even more subtlety, concerned the degree to which Christians could immerse themselves in the stream of community life without seeming to bear witness to what was no longer their faith. No longer did they believe in the efficacy of idols. Nor did they accept the principle that immoral acts lost their immoral quality when they were performed in the name of religion or of social intercourse.

In Pergamum, therefore, the two great moral and ethical issues of the early church in Asia came into sharp focus. On the one hand the Christians were beset by the watchful and insistent priesthood of the imperial cult. All sorts of pressures were put upon them to force their conformity to this religio-political cultus, with the constant threat of persecution as a deterrent to their Christian steadfastness.

On the other hand was the more insidious, perhaps even more powerful stimulus to maintain the places in society which had been theirs by "going along with the crowd" in practices which implied,if they did not actually eventuate in, an indifference to moral values.

The Pergamenians stood in need of warning concerning the second danger. Their complacent acceptance of the doctrine of Antinomianism among them showed a weakening of the stern moral fibre which was neces-

1. Revelation 2:24.

sary to endurance. What now is tolerated may soon be embraced, seems to be the Apocalyptist's feeling about their state. They had not yet fallen, but were in so unstable an equilibrium that they might readily be upset.

If the danger of accepting Antinomian doctrine threatened the Christians at Pergamum, it had already overtaken the Thyatiran Christians. At Thyatira, the Antinomian party, followers of the woman Jezebel, was probably in the majority. The Seer describes those who are not of it as "the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine."[1] Although this statement is by no means conclusive proof that Jezebel controlled the majority of the church, it does carry an intimation that such was the case. Under the leadership of this vigorous and strong-minded woman, the Thyatirans had accepted the idea that it was perfectly all right to take large part in the life of the community, even though by doing so there was apparent endorsement of idol-worshipping practices and of immorality and debauchery. It may be that the prophetess deplored these implications as much as any one. She was a respected member of the church, and a person of demonstrably unclean life probably would not have been given so large a hearing in a Christian church. Yet John speaks of her as an adulteress. What was involved in her teaching which gave him license to employ such strong terms in condemning her?

The answer to that question involves an understanding of the nature of life in Thyatira. In the preceding chapter of this discussion the trade guilds which formed so large a part of the city's life were discussed in some detail. They were extremely broad-gauged and influential organizations. A man in business who did not belong to one of

them might as well go out of business. Unless guild contacts were maintained, a family's social life was sorely curtailed. Security for the latter days of life was dependent upon belonging to a benefit guild of some sort. In almost every relationship of life the trade guild played a decisive part in the life of the citizens of Thyatira, Christian and non-Christian alike.

It seems very possible that in the beginnings of Christianity in Thyatira the full implications of the new faith were not realized. Perhaps only after attempts to live the Christian life did the followers of the Way discover just what a strong antagonism they faced. We of the twentieth century, who are yet discovering almost daily new implications of a faith now two millenia old should not impute too much insight and spiritual discernment to these early followers of our Master. But little by little it began to dawn upon some of the more sensitive Christians that they were now citizens of two worlds, and that the claims of those worlds were in opposition to each other. It must have been highly repugnant to an earnest Christian to witness the opening ceremonies of his guild, which consisted in an act of adoration or oblation to a pagan god who was the patron of the guild. We cannot tell just when it dawned upon Christians with full force that they who had foresworn idols, were here participating in an act which amounted to the worship of an idol.

But one thing is psychologically certain. When a Christian did feel that dualism, he immediately took steps to resolve it, for to admit it would have set up an intolerable tension within his life. The simplest way to resolve it would be, of course, to project the Christian view of God into the situation. If there be but one God, no idol of clay or wood or metal is anything more than a figment of the imagination. Hence it is no god at all which is being worshipped in the ceremony of the guild.

It is not worship, but simply respect being paid to the skill of men as that skill is personified and universalized into a name. Thus the Christian member of a trade guild might well have argued.

Like all half-truths, this one is hard to combat. There is assuredly only one God, and idols are only images which have no significance apart from the materials of which they are composed, and the artistic skill with which they have been shaped. But that fact does not take into account the further fact that the pagans did believe the idols to be gods, and furthermore would inevitably consider that whoever took part in the ceremonies was also worshipping the god, hence admitting the god to be an object of worship. To the pagan mind, therefore, for one to take part in the ceremony was for him to accept the validity of the god. Accordingly, when a Christian took part, his Christian testimony to the oneness of God was destroyed, and technically he became an idolater.

Even more difficult for a Christian was the matter of accompaniments of the guild meetings and festivals. Among a sensual people with no high standard of community morals, these gatherings were bound to be conducted in ways which were not acceptable to the pure tenets of Christian morality. In the name of fellowship and entertainment drunkenness, obscenities, and sexual irregularities and excesses were the rule. All of this was in perfect compatibility with the customs of the age. The Christian standards of morality and conduct stood out among the codes of contemporary cultures like pines towering above scrub oaks.

It must, then, have been extremely repugnant to a convinced disciple of Jesus to continue to share in the "meetings" of the guild to which he belonged. Many a man must have sat uneasy and ashamed, gradually taking a less and less active part as his conviction grew that the evil time needed to be redeemed. But, existing side by side with his distaste

for the flagrant violations of his ethical standards was the hateful fact that upon the same guild whose practices disgusted him depended his job security, his place in community life, his social relationships, the welfare of his family. In our preceding chapter the pervasive force of these institutions has already been described. It was an intrepid man indeed who could bring himself to a sharp break with the established conduct of so basic a social agency.

Those who did not break with the order must certainly have sought to discover a means of rationalizing the worst features of the orgies. One means of doing so was at hand in the theory of moral indifference, based upon a dualism which divided soul and body, making each independent of the deeds of the other. Such a theory made possible participation in all sorts of things which were specifically against Christian moral standards, since it was but the body which participated, and no mere bodily defilement had power to defile the soul. Perhaps there were others who argued that "sin should abound that grace might abound the more," and who turned eagerly to the church for forgiveness after each orgy. Such people would find a perverse sort of satisfaction in the remission of grievous and gross sins of the flesh. More likely there were still others, among whom the prophetess was very probably numbered, who excused the Christian guild member on the ground of social inevitability, on the ground that when one is in Rome one must do as the Romans do. In summary, their views were probably something like this: The sins of the common guild gatherings were sins indeed. Christians who participated in them should do so with distaste, and in as small a degree as possible. The practical compulsion of the situation had to be realized, and such compromises made as were necessary to the maintenance of the individual's position in society.

Apparently none of these questions had been decided at the time the Apocalypse was written. There seems to have been no "corpus" of Christian thought, no clear-cut pronouncement with authority to which the leaders of a church might turn for guidance. The churches were making their own decisions, and these were based as much upon the exigency of each situation as upon the right and wrong aspects of the case. Thus, in Ephesus, where Paul's teaching upon such matters was probably well-known, the smooth doctrines of compromise were rejected with real vehemence and passion. Churches like Smyrna and Philadelphia were either too thoroughly based upon gospel foundations to be much troubled by these questions, or too much occupied with external problems to be very introspective about what went on within their own midst. Or they were not in centers where the pagan organizations had their chief strength. At any rate, there is no mention of such trouble in the letters to these churches. Neither is it dealt with in the letter to the Laodiceans, but one has the feeling that in that smug and compromising church, so little concerned with a whole-hearted endorsement of anything, it would have been the rule to do what was expedient and never mind the scruples.

For the churches at Pergamum and Thyatira it was debated, an issue upon which the churches were divided. It certainly must have made for controversy of a spirited nature. The conservatives, upon the one hand, would contend earnestly for a surgical cutting of whatever ties still bound the believer up with an immoral and blasphemous paganism, regardless of the cost. Only thus could spiritual integrity be gained for individuals or for the churches. But the liberals would reject such strong measures, holding them to be unnecessary to Christian discipleship, and advocating half-measures in varying degrees, as the current situation or the temper of the antagonist demanded.

John unhesitatingly aligned himself with the severe party which demanded a clean break with paganism. Anything less, he was sure, led straight to a devalued religion which had no power in it. Compromise was sure to lead to practical idolatry and to the toleration of sensual sin in its grossest form, if not to an actual share in its orgies. So strongly did he feel about the matter that he condemned the compromising teachers as if they themselves were in practice idolaters and fornicators. Both they and their followers were marked for destruction unless they mended their ways.

For the Thyatirans it was a tragedy to have such a bad infection with the virus of compromise, since the church was warm-hearted and enthusiastic. It was a growing church, developing, from its inception until the Apocalyptist wrote to it, with constantly expanding charity and patience and faith and loving service. In all these respects it might have served as a model for other Christian communities. But Thyatira erred where Ephesus was strong: it concerned itself so little with correct doctrine that it lost the firm footing in truth so needed by a group which must make delicate and subtle moral distinctions. Sound doctrine is never an end in itself, but it is the sine qua non of conduct which is consistent and high-minded. Men cannot act upon principles which they do not accept nor understand. When soundness of idea has been undermined, the outworks of conduct have been breached, and the decay of morality is imminent and inevitable.

The situation was different at the church in Sardis. There was not enough life left in the church to generate a conflict. After an enthusiastic and wholesouled beginning the Christian community had steadily declined, living upon its memories, looking to its past for justification

of its existence until it was but a shell, a hard and brittle monument to that distant past, with no life pulsing within it. The Sardians were guilty of refusing to accept responsibility for the message of life which they had received. Having gotten it for themselves, they had forgotten that only by sharing the good news could it be kept. Turned in upon itself the church sickened and died until by the time of the Apocalypse it was beyond help, a dead thing, kept in a semblance of life by the patient and faithful ministrations of a handful of its members who had not succumbed to the general lethargy. Here is a true picture of moral indifference. Existing in the midst of a considerable community, with opportunities to evangelize, to lift the level of life and the veil of paganism from friends and neighbors, to testify flamingly and winsomely in the name of Christ, the Sardian Christian made nothing of it. They forgot what they had received, forgot their own first fearless, joyful raptures in the faith, and settled into a rut of complacency and inactivity, looking back to the "good old days" when they had known the joys of salvation and of witness. Their case was even worse than that of the lukewarm Laodiceans, for they were cold. It was not a coldness of antagonism, but a coldness of death. The chill hand of death was upon them, their institution already was settling into the rigidity and unresponsiveness which is death's accompaniment. Even the judgment which John pronounced upon the church has a sort of resignation about it. There is nothing vibrantly alive in the whole letter.

While we do not in the least condone the churches of other cities for their sins and weaknesses, still there is no other such hopeless picture among the seven as this. For in all the rest of the churches life remains. Badly warped and twisted, as some of them are, each exhibits

some Christian characteristics. But in Sardis there are a few faithful ones tending the corpse of a dead church. That is all.

So there is no moral or ethical problem to be discussed in the case of Sardis. It is too late for that. There had been a problem, the problem of breaking up a mood of complacency and self-satisfaction, the problem of turning the vision of the people outward upon the need of the city. The generation and maintenance of enthusiasm had been a problem. But not any more. The church at Sardis was dead. Ephesus had the problem of its intemperate, hot-headed zeal. Smyrna was a weak little church in temporal power. Pergamum and Thyatira had their false teachers to contend with. Yet these churches all had a vigorous internal life and character of their own, but not Sardis. Sardis was dead. This letter is its epitaph.

The juxtaposition of the letters to Sardis and to Philadelphia develops one of the most remarkable contrasts one could imagine. Across the former blows the cold wind of dissolution, bearing the odor of decay. The latter burns with the savor of incense offered upon an altar.

The Philadelphian church had not much except an opportunity, but it was making the most of that. Its problem was how to make its limited strength go as far as it could in the evangelization of the interior country to the eastward. That is a real problem, and an ethical one, for any person or institution: how can our resources be used to the best advantage to accomplish the task which is before us? The lesson of true and effective stewardship is a hard and tedious lesson to learn. In addition, the Philadelphian Christians had to come to terms with a recalcitrant and vicious Jewish party which was determined to undo their work. It is not without significance that the two churches designated in the

1. Romans 12:20

Apocalypse as being weak are also the ones which have to deal with Jewish opposition. It is probably not too much to state that the persecution of the Jews in both instances had increased the general opposition to Christianity and that the churches moved forward against greater odds and with greater difficulties than elsewhere. The results of this Jewish activity could probably be seen in the reluctance of people of prominence to become identified with the new movement. Such folk are always a bit chary of relationship to causes which are in the least suspect.

It must have taken a large measure of Christian grace to deal with such opposition, and surely one of the real ethical problems for the Smyrneans and for the Philadelphians was the adjustment of their own personal feelings and the conduct of the church as a whole, towards their persecutors. In their own milieu they had ample opportunity to practice the Pauline dictum concerning the heaping of coals of fire.[1]

Philadelphian Christians must have been able to manage their own feelings, and to maintain a thoroughly Christian attitude, for they remained a significant missionary body, meeting their obligation to the unevangelized countryside. If their own spirits had been soured, or if their corporate life had been poisoned by hatred of their Jewish opponents, this missionary spirit would certainly have withered. For no group can long maintain a large-hearted concern for others when it is engaged in bitter controversy and strife, no matter how worthy its cause and how debased its opponents.

Through all the troubled time these earnest Christian souls had steadfastly kept the faith, had not denied the name of their Lord, either by outright denial or by conduct so unbecoming a Christian that it would have amounted to a practical denial. Missionary spirits in a missionary

city, they continued faithful to their trust. Christ had a great church at Philadelphia.

The peril of wealth and abundance has rarely been so devastatingly demonstrated as in the letter to the Laodiceans. Above most other churches, this one was favored. It was part of a prosperous and thriving community. It had assets of sufficient strength to enable it to carry on a strong work of evangelism and preaching. But the possession of wealth is a breeder of timidity; and timidity is the enemy of a firm stand upon principle. Nowhere in the Apocalypse is this so cearly demonstrated. The Laodiceans were so unwilling to stand up and be counted in any conflict of spiritual issues that John describes them as being nauseatingly lukewarm. The spirit of compromise was the spirit of the church.

This is not of itself a bad thing. There is a sort of compromise which is able to harmonize conflicting viewpoints until each can, without giving up any thing really essential, find agreement with the other. But the Laodicean type of compromise was of the sort which warily refuses to be pushed into taking a stand, seeking rather to be so neutral as to give offense to nobody. This sort of character may easily benefit a city which derives its income largely from commercial transactions. It must please those to whom it sells, those from whom it buys and those who borrow from or lend to it. But it ill-befits a Christian body to be so queasy about making up its mind.

The tragedy was that the Laodiceans mistook the nature of their malady. They thought it indicated health. There was no controversey in this church. Its members were too adept at the art of pleasing everybody. They would rather let something unhealthy happen than to stir up a fuss. Their watch-word could easily have been a word of Paul torn from

1. I Corinthians 14:40.

context and used unadvisedly: "Let everything be done decently and in order."[1] The Laodiceans were proud of the tranquil state of their church. Its quiet was a good omen. Moreover, it had all it needed of material goods; nothing was lacking for its comfort or equipment. Its members need not fear for the future. The church was prepared to care for those in need. It was a well fed, well clothed, well housed congregation, and quite well satisfied with itself. It had, in fact, everything except a sense of humility and of its own insufficiency to provide the things which matter most.

The problem was both theological and ethical; theological because these folk were assuming themselves to be capable of doing what only God can do, i.e., to provide a true security; ethical because self-sufficiency almost without exception deadens the sense of responsibility toward others outside the circle, and develops a detestable smugness and self-righteousness. Along with this goes the unfounded assumption that other peoples' troubles must be somehow their own fault.

The Laodicean church was not as dead as Sardis was, but it was not much more alive. The process toward disintegration was well advanced. It was a church which could live in a world in which misery was rife without any appreciable concern for that misery, thinking only of its own sufficiency. Like Sardis, it was turned in upon itself in an attitude which had no claim to the term Christian.

We have no hint in the letter itself of any outward opposition which the church faced. Doubtless its genius for compromise and indecision had eliminated any point of friction. Being prepared to be "all things to all men" in the worst sense of that term, the Laodiceans had probably watered down their faith until the residuum was so diluted as not to

offend the sensibilities of even the most sensitive pagan or heresy-hunting Judaizer.

It is significant that only in the letters to the dead church at Sardis and the lukewarm, temporizing church at Laodicea do we find no reference at all to organized conflict, either within or without. Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira all had false teaching and debates about orthodoxy going on. Pergamum had, in addition, the priesthood of the imperial cult with which to contend. Smyrna and Philadelphia were preyed upon by spiteful Jews. But of Sardis and Laodicea and their relations with their communities or with dissident groups we hear nothing.

This is in no way surprising. Conflict presupposes vigorous life, which was just the ingredient which was lacking in the lives of these two churches. We are left to surmise what relationships they may have had with the communities in which their "candlesticks" stood.

Again it must be stated that, in these seven letters, we are dealing with a situation which is at once individual and typical. John is using the seven churches as a sort of comprehensive model of Christianity as it existed in his day. The sins and virtues of these seven churches existed to a greater or lesser degree, and in varying proportions, throughout the churches of the latter first century, especially in Asia, the region to which John addressed himself. To the extent to which these are treated as a typical seven, representative of the rest, and meant to sum up the rest in symbolic fashion, we may legitimately look for some heightening of the colors, some sharpening of the contrast between what is good and what is bad.

But equally as they are typical, these churches are individuals. They are definitely addressed in accordance with the characteristics of

the cities in which they were located. Specific situations are referred to again and again, which can not be thought of simply as symbols. These were real churches, their situations substantially as they are here recorded. The mixture of strength and weakness in most of them approximated that of the ordinary church in such cities as Colossae, Hierapolis, and Miletus. No matter where a Christian lived he would see somewhere in the compass of the seven letters, certain likenesses to his own church life.

It may be life was a bit stronger in Sardis than the letter would indicate, that Laodicea could make up its mind about some things, and that the Thyatiran Jezebel may have been not quite so black as she is painted. Likewise we must suspect that the argument from silence is not conclusive, and that the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia did leave something to be desired in some attributes of which we have no knowledge. But the Seven are One, and the One is Seven, and we must leave it there, without being able to draw a clear line of demarcation between the two.

In summary, we may say that the problem of the Ephesian church was of love and zeal in tension, and of an attitude toward a type of false teaching which could easily result in loose living. The Smyrnean problem was of self-discipline to Christian conduct toward a persecuting group. For the Pergamenian Christians, the struggle lay in the relationship of Christians to the imperial cultus, with its idolatrous worship. This was one of the two basic problems of the time, the other being one which was also faced by Ephesus and Pergamum, but in sharpest degree by the church at Thyatira, i.e., the degree to which participation in pagan community life might be enjoyed without the loss of Christian integrity and witness. Sardis faced the problem of "waking the dead," of

turning outward to the needs of the world which it had neglected so long that its sense of responsibility was gone. Philadelphia shared the problem of Smyrna, with the added difficulty of having an heroic task to do with small resources, which drove it to find a proper balance between means and ends, and between tasks of first importance and lesser ones. The Laodiceans had first to learn to make up their minds, then to look beyond their own borders with compassion and vision.

These are importunate questions. They sharply illuminate the unity of history, and establish our kinship with these early Asiatic Christians. For the problems, with but minor changes in emphasis, become problems which many churches face in the modern world. Nor are these moderns more successful in solving them than were their predecessors of the ancient time. The demands of the gospel are strong and positive, and draw the best out of that man or group who would place himself in the hands of Jesus. And they are unfailingly ethical, for there is never a point at which the gospel allows a man to isolate himself from society, to retire from the world, or to dissociate himself from his fellows. Where there is contact, there are responsibilities, and areas of conflict. There too is the Spirit of Christ.

CHAPTER FIVE

A PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY OF GOOD AND EVIL

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One of the concerns of the writer of the Apocalypse was to his readers a rough-hewn and practical "philosophy" of good and evil, so that they might not be too thoroughly disheartened and despairing about the bitter persecutions which were soon to burst upon them. To this end, a significant portion of the book is given over to a discussion of the book is given over to a discussion of the nature, origin, and end of evil. Other sections of the Apocalypse deal, in a more sporadic fashion, with a fairly well-defined conception of "works" which the Apocalyptist holds.

The plan of this chapter is to present first John's discussion of evil, as it is to be found especially in chapters twelve, seventeen and eighteen, twenty, and twenty-one and twenty-two. Of course, other portions of the Apocalypse will enter the discussion, but the major lines of thought will center upon the specified passages. When the ultimate fate of evil has been described, attention will be given to a statement of what might almost be called John's"doctrine of works". The meaning and significance of "works" will be dealt with, and then the relation of good or evil works to the judgment of God will be shown.

It is evident that these two sections are somewhat closely related. Indeed, no consideration of evil is complete which does not take into account both the manifestation of evil in the form of overt acts, and the final judgment of God which rests upon acts of wickedness and wrong. The separation of the two sections in this discussion serves the purpose of allowing the treatment of the philosophy of evil to be somewhat closer knit than if the elaboration of the doctrine of works had been included within it. With this brief word of explanation, we are ready to turn to the material of the chapter.

I

THE ULTIMATE FATE OF EVIL

Chapters two and three, which have been dealt with above, give a notion of the actual manifestation of evil as it appeared to the Christians of the seven Churches. In its most frightening guise, wickedness appeared to those people as the cult of the Emperor, demanding from everyone a religious allegiance to the name and idea of the emperor which the Christians were simply unable to give and remain true to the essential nature of their faith. This form of evil was given force by the massed power of the empire soldiery. No one was immune from the threat, which, in the days of Domitian, became explicit as well as implicit. Former Emperors, from the days of Augustus, had been diffident about exercising the "divine" power which had been theirs. Beyond a willingness to allow to certain cities the honor of erecting temples to house the cult, and to accept the plaudits of the populace, they in general had not been willing to go. No concerted, Empire-wide drive to enlist everyone beneath the banner of the imperial cult had yet been set in motion.

But, with the advent of Domitian, all this was changed. The edict went out that all men were to make their obeisance to the imperial altar, and those who would not comply should be compelled and punished. To the Christians this was a disaster indeed, threatening them with the dilemma of apostasy or punishment of a most cruel sort. By the later years of Domitian's reign, i.e.,

In addition to these problems which were related rather directly to a specialized type of environment, the Christians faced other, more personal and universal problems of their own conduct and attitude. Thus, the Ephesian church must work out somehow the contradiction between love and zeal, and hold those two forces in balance, permitting neither sentimental softness nor fanatic hardness to dictate the course of the life of the church. The basic Christian virtues needed to be stated again and again to keep people from forgetting how to be stedfast and poised, how to remain patient under persecution, how to keep themselves from hatred of the despised overlords, how to be strong and courageous when persecution came near, even when they themselves were feeling the sting of the lash, or worse.

It is in a realistic way that the letters to the seven churches set out the nature of evil as it was manifested to the Christians of Asia in the closing years of the first Christian century. As we read those short descriptions of the kind of thing the churches faced, something of the insecurity and vulnerability of their situation communicates itself. These people were facing evil in its rawest forms, and at the same time in forms which appealed with great subtlety to their strong wish for calm and peaceful existence. Certainly they needed to have the real nature and destiny of evil made clear to them.

In various parts of the Apocalypse the author seeks to give them this clarity of vision. Various aspects of the problem he treats of in chapters twelve, seventeen and eighteen, twenty, and twenty-one and twenty-two. We shall examine these passages to discover what message about evil the Apocalyptist wishes to convey to his readers.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the Apocalypse is the constantly recurring shift of viewpoint between heaven and earth. The whole book sets

itself out in terms of a heavenly vision which enlightens the Seer about what shall come to pass shortly upon the earth. Various aspects of the Christian life as it is lived out by the members of the Seven Churches produce emotions in John which lead to heavenly revelations. Back and forth the point of view shifts, now in heaven, now on earth, and one of the major problems of the interpretation of the Apocalypse is to discover precisely where discussion of what is temporal ends and that of the heavenly realms begin.

The enigmatic twelfth chapter represents a shift into heaven of the situation of chapters two and three. There evil is present in power and might. It is overt and rampant, and threatening to destroy the churches. The twelfth chapter removes the scene of the conflict between this wickedness and the goodness of the Christians and their Lord from the earth altogether, and sets it forth in a new dimension, the dimension of eternity. It does so in a symbolism which is obscure and difficult, and which has given rise to many a weird conception by commentators who have somehow missed the point of what is being set forth.

It is a strange picture which is set before us. In heaven is a sun-clad woman, the heavenly bodies surrounding her. She is about to bear a child, and waiting voraciously for the child to be born is a great red dragon, which has seven heads and ten horns. But when the child is born, the dragon is frustrated in its attempt to devour it, for the child, a boy, is caught up to the throne of God, while the woman flees for sanctuary into the wilderness. Then the dragon and his angels battle against the archangel Michael and his angels. The former are roundly defeated so that there is not any place left for them anymore.

1. Charles, R. H., "The Revelation of St. John", Volume I, p. 298.

2. Revelation 11:15.

3. Revelation 12.

4. Revelation 13.

5. Revelation 14 - 19.

6. Revelation 20:1 - 3.

7. Revelation 21:9 - 22:2, 14, 15, 17; 20:4 - 6.

8. Revelation 20:7 - 10.

9. Revelation 20:11 - 15.

10. Revelation 21:5a, 4d, 5bc, 6; 22:3 - 5.

11. Revelation 20:10.

Thus the conflict of good and evil is set out in terms of cosmic proportions not as a battle which has its origin upon earth, nor one which is limited to the struggles of the flesh. This is a normal apocalyptic presupposition, that the "world's disorder and sin is only a part of the disorder and sin affecting the spiritual world."[1]

The conflict is limited neither to this world nor to this life. There is no release from it until the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ.

The sounding of the seventh trumpet[2] is the signal for the increase and climax of the power of Satan upon the earth: the casting down of Satan upon the earth,[3] the manifestation of the kingdom of Antichrist in Imperial Rome and the cult of the Emperor,[4] the judgments upon Rome[5] and Satan,[6] the millennial reign of the martyrs,[7] the overthrow of the unbelieving hosts of God and Magog,[8] the final judgment,[9] and the blessed consummation of the Kingdom of God.[10]

This crowning evil, however, was not the sign of a waxing but of a waning power, a death struggle in the fullest sense of the term. It was the closing phase of a struggle which had its beginning in heaven with the revolt of the dragon and his angels against the heavenly authority represented by Michael and his angels. This conflict was destined to continue in fierce strength upon the earth until at the last the prince of wickedness should be done away with and cast into the abyss, first for a thousand years, and then, after a brief flurry of resurgence, forever.[11] The very fierceness of the fight upon earth, due to the actual presence there of the dragon himself, bears witness to the vindication of God's sovereignty and goodness in heavenly places. In heaven Satan (the dragon) had been overcome, his place was no longer found there, but he must needs inhabit the earth until his final downfall and destruction.

1. This section is indebted to F. C. Burkitt's discussion of the Apocalypse in the Encyclopedia Brittanica, Volume II, p. 100.

The message of the Apocalyptist was that that downfall was imminent, since whatever has been vanquished in heaven can have no lasting strength upon the earth. Hence all of the raging of Satan and his various minions which is described with such vividness in chapter thirteen and following is not to be feared. It represents only the thrashing in death-agony of a beaten and doomed foe, whose malignity and venom are increased because of his awareness of the shortness of the time which remains to him, and the futility of all his efforts.

Such is the nature of the vision of chapter twelve, and such the outline of its interpretation, not in full, but with respect to the good-evil struggle which is our immediate concern. There is a Platonic flavor to the passage, wherein earthly events are seen to be aspects of their heavenly counterparts, which have a determinative and conditioning influence upon the natural world. What exists in heaven shall indeed exist on earth.

Concerning the symbolic nature of the chapter Franz Boll has a brilliant and, in the main, satisfying word to say. Expositors of the Apocalypse, especially Gunkel and Bousset had noted and commented upon the presence of remote Babylonian mythological ideas in apocalyptic literature generally. This use of ancient sources seemed to be an interesting but rather inexplicable part of apocalyptic idiom. What conscious inheritance did Jewish and Christian writers of the centuries just around the time of Christ have from ancient, pagan Babylon?

Professor Boll demonstrated, in his highly original book, Aus der Offenbarung Johannis, 1914[1], that one of the sources used by the Apocalyptist was the contemporary Graeco-Roman astrology current in the first century, which derived much of its material from the ancient Babylonians, who had been great pioneers in the field.

1. Scott, C. A. A., "Revelation", p. 227.

2. Burkitt, F. C., "Apocalypse", in Encyclopedia Brittanica, Volume II, p. 100.

3. Judges 5:20.

To the interpretation of this controversial twelfth chapter Boll's method makes large and significant contribution. "And a great sign was seen in heaven" the chapter begins. But, according to Scott,

> the scene which follows is transacted not in heaven, wherein it is impossible to think of a "wilderness," but "in the heavens", or as we might say, "in the sky!"[1]

Just so, says Boll, that is absolutely accurate. The sign was seen in the heavens because it is a fixture of the heavens, a constellation or constellations, which is interpreted symbolically to tell of the heavenly significance and fundamental character of the good-evil struggle. What constellation in the heavens could be considered as a woman, clothed with the sun and with the moon at her feet? One of the twelve signs of the Zodiac, i.e., Virgo. And just below Virgo in the Zodiac is the dragon, i.e., Hydra. Or, to change cultures for a moment, the Egyptian name for the constellation we call Virgo is Isis, and the Hydra-dragon is Typhon, the Nile-crocodile.

> So in vv. 15 - 16, when the scene is transferred to earth and the Dragon makes war with the Woman, his peculiar method is to drown her with a river-flood, which fails because--still more peculiar--the earth swallows the flood. Why? Because, says Boll, we are still dealing with Isis and Typhon, and the Nile-flood, Typhon's weapon, is swallowed by the Egyptian earth.[2]

Thus the Apocalyptist employs the lore of the ancient east to reenforce the point which he desires to make. "The stars in their courses fight"[3], not against Sisera this time, but against the evil of which he was a type in his own generation. What happened in heaven, i.e., the birth of the Messiah, the struggle between good and evil which was sharpened and intensified by His birth, the persecution of the community of God which brought Him forth, has its earthly counterpart. The action has now reached the point of persecution, which should neither dismay nor surprise the saints, since it is all in the heavenly pattern, and since the triumph of the

right is sure, as sure as the stars which give validation to those who can read their secrets.

Does this combination of an interpretation based upon Graeco-Roman astrologers' use of Babylonian mythology and including overtones of Egyptian lore as an aid to interpretation seem a bit far-fetched? We must remember that in that day the ideas of many ancient cultures were available to people of a curious turn of mind. Then, as now, it was a commonplace to interpret eclectically, picking and choosing what was desired out of a mass of knowledge, perhaps as often as now without adequate canons of selection and judgment. And it is undeniably true that to read the twelfth chapter of the Apocalypse under such an interpretation gives to that chapter a cogency, an intelligibility and a relevance which it does not seem to achieve under more conventional modes of interpretation.

Thus, the conflict which the Christians in the Asian churches were facing, the bitter struggle with powerful forces of evil, is seen to be part and parcel of a world-struggle which originated in heaven and which has there been decided in favor of the good. The stars in the heavens are called upon to bear witness to the truth of that heavenly conflict, and to its ultimate resolution, with good regnant with the Regnant God. The earthly conflict, accordingly, does not have its issue in doubt. No matter how difficult the Christian lot may be, no matter how much more difficult it may become in the immediate future, the end is as certain as it is certain that there is no place found anymore in heaven for the dragon and his angels.

In the section which begins with chapter seventeen of the Apocalypse this "practical" philosophy of evil is carried one more step toward its full statement. In these chapters, evil, having been defeated in heavenly

places, is now condemned and overcome upon the earth. In a vision of the future so vividly conceived and felt that the Apocalyptist speaks as if it were already attained, the day of the downfall of evil upon the earth is seen. It is a description remarkable alike for its realism and for its comprehensiveness. Judgment is rendered accurately and precisely for the evil deeds of the city of Rome, which in this instance stands for the whole system of Roman government as it related itself to idolatrous and immoral practices. It stands, as capital cities always stand, for the whole of the reality of the totality of life and influence which flowed out from the city, and had its root and center there. This judgment the Apocalyptist sees as the just and full earnings of a long-time flaunting of God and of His righteousness. Such ungodliness could have but one logical end unless ours is a crazy world. Down the city must go, into ruin and destruction. The wickedness which was for so long an affront to God and a peril to the Christian community must be wiped out.

In chapter seventeen the Seer is promised by an angel that he will now be shown the "judgment of the Great Harlot." But in the entire course of the chapter the subject of judgment is not again referred to, save at verse sixteen. Instead, an elaborate picture of the Harlot is presented, along with some explanations of the more obscure elements of the vision. It is in chapter eighteen that the judgment of the Great Harlot is given in flashing colors and triumphant detail. It is then, absolutely imperative to deal with these two chapters as a unit, dealing with them as one, and not as discrete and separate sections.

Sitting upon a scarlet beast, blasphemous, seven-headed and ten-horned, the Apocalyptist visions the Great Babylon, Mother of Harlots, which is his symbolic name for Rome. She was arrayed in very rich vestments, decked with

jewels and costly golden baubles, but her nature was as unclean and foul as the pit of hell. Such great wonder fell upon the Seer because of the strange mount of the Harlot that the angel, in a digression, presented to him some additional facts about the beast. The seven heads represented seven kings, or emperors, the ten horns were ten subordinate kings. These are at one in their purpose to make war with the Lamb of God, symbolic representation of the Messiah. But, in the course of future events, the ten subordinate kings will conspire with the great elemental force of evil itself against the Harlot, and it will be their lot to bring her down to destruction.

Still another symbolic presentation of the Seven heads reveals them to be the seven hills upon which the woman sits. This is a clear allusion to the city of Rome, heartbeat, fountainhead, and center of empire. All these she was, but spiritually a very Babylon.

So the forces of evil themselves would conspire against a Woman who was a City, and would bring her end about without any intervention of the forces of good at all. Thus, in the providence of God, there would come about a clear and convincing demonstration of the inherent instability of evil, which not only cannot stand in its own right, but which acts as a disintegrating factor in every situation where it is present, attesting its impermanence and its dissolute character.

The eighteenth chapter opens with a declaration that "Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen." This passage employs a Hebrew construction known as the "prophetic perfect", wherein a certain, but future, event is spoken of as if it had already transpired, so sure is the Apocalyptist of the certainty of the things of which he writes. Fallen is the city, and become the dwelling place of creatures who inhabit only wilderness country. The Seer goes on to celebrate the imminent fall of this greatest of all

1. Revelation 18:6.

2. Galatians 6:7.

ancient cities, and to warn the people of God that they shall "come forth out of her, that ye have no fellowship with her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues." For her judgment is close upon her, a judgment which will be administered in terms of the Law of the Harvest: "Render unto her even as she rendered, and double unto her double, according to her works."[1]

This is a familiar principle of Christian life and ethics which permeates the entire New Testament, and means exactly the same thing as "As ye sow, so shall ye also reap."[2]

As the destruction of the city proceeds, there is great lamentation on all sides. The kings of the earth, remembering her great power and magnificence and influence in world affairs, weep loudly for her. Perhaps their weeping is tinged with anxiety, since they aped her in whatever ways they might, and themselves are perhaps not blameless of her misdeeds. The merchants of the earth, seeing in her destruction the end of their most profitable market, especially for costly and extravagant luxuries, add their voices to the elegy. Seafaring men, in the holds of whose ships were carried the cargoes which made the city magnificent and gorgeous, celebrate her downfall in dust and ashes, mournfully apprehensive of their future on the sea now that she is gone.

But the final blow was not to be struck by an earthly foe. It was against heaven that Rome had sinned most grievously. It was an angel which administered the coup de grace. Casting a heavy millstone into the depths of the sea, the angel cried with a great voice that as the stone went irrevocably to the bottom, so should the falling of the city be complete and permanent. There should be no more life at all in her. She was doomed and done for. Not one of the homely offices of common life should survive

within the walls of Great Babylon when God shall come upon her in wrath and righteousness: no more music should sound in her, no lamp should burn, no new family should be established. Wickedness cannot stand in the face of a righteous judgment. Rome-Babylon lay athwart the purposes of God. She should surely be punished for her sins.

The reaction to the perishing of the City may be lamentation upon earth, but no such emotion was shown in heaven. There, everyone who was before the throne of God cried out with a loud voice, Hallelujah. There, it was recognized that God had done a great thing, won a great victory over the Harlot-City. The Lord God, the Almighty, reigneth.

So is the third great step in the construction of a practical working philosophy of evil and good taken by the Apocalyptist. The present situation of the churches presents them with certain problems of Christian life in which evil plays a vital and determinative role. These problems, and the evil of them, are seen to be related to the age-old and spiritual struggle between good and evil which rages in heaven as on earth, but which has actually been resolved in heaven, through the victory of Michael and his angels over the dragon and his angels. Thus victory is assured to the righteous upon the earth. That victory will be in terms of a complete overcoming of all wickedness upon the earth, as typified and summed up in the City which was the source of so much of the idolatry and immorality which was rampant in the ancient world. Her end is to be accomplished by the rebellion and insurrection of those who have been her vassals, one evil overcoming another.

But we are not at all to suppose that the invading hordes who accomplish the downfall of Rome shall escape their own punishment. The concluding verses of chapter nineteen deal adequately with them. As they have

1. Isaiah 10:5.

overcome the Great Harlot, so they themselves are to be overcome through the power of the Risen Christ, whose righteousness is more than a match for any coalition of evil, be it ever so powerful and deadly. God may indeed employ instruments which are evil for a season, and for the carrying out of certain phases of his will. So Isaiah had cried,"Ho, Assyria, rod of mine anger,"[1] to indicate the divine providence which was using the hordes of that empire as a chastening rod on the Chosen People. But in the last analysis, only the strength of God and of His Christ is sufficient in quantity or adequate in quality to deal the final blow to the wickedness of the world. Evil cannot stand against the horseman who is called Faithful and True, and the Word of God. He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and there is no gainsaying his power and might. He deals effectively and finally with the forces of evil which are at work upon the earth, overcoming them as effectively upon the human plane as Michael had done when the war in heaven resulted in the rout of the dragon and his angels.

One more phase remains, however, in the purging of creation from the wickedness with which it is obsessed. The Source of Evil, i.e., the dragon, or Satan, has been overcome in heaven, and has transferred his scene of operations for a little while to earth. Now his earthly forces have been decisively routed and overcome, but he himself remains to be dealt with. Wherefore John relates how an angel came down from that heaven which was the scene of the dragon's former defeat, which angel laid hold of the dragon and shut him up in the abyss. In many of the old mythologies which were common currency in the ancient world, evil was represented as a sort of Chaos-dragon, who rose from out a bottomless pit to discomfit and plague the world. In keeping with ideas commonly held by many people, the source and principle of evil is herewith disposed of by hurling him back into the abyss from which he has been so often represented as coming. With the

1. Düsterdieck, F., "Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Revelation of John", p. 475.

fact of his temporary lossing at the end of a thousand years for a little time to plague men once again we are not concerned, but rather with the further fact that following this interim period, he is once again consigned to the abyss. This time it is indeed the end of evil.

Thus what began as a conflict in heaven between heavenly adversaries, and moved to earth as a struggle between men motivated by one or another of the celestial antagonists has finally been resolved, again by heavenly counterparts of the earthly battles. Evil has been shown to be completely without the boundaries of the ultimate will of God, to have no place in his finished kingdom, and to be no real and necessary terror to the Christian. For to the one who will be faithful, to the one who overcomes, to the one who is stedfast even to the point of martyrdom, there will be revealed the beauty and the glory of the purged and renewed creation of God. It is with his vision of this glorious sight that the Apocalyptist closes his volume, and it is the crowning consummation of his philosophy of good and evil: after all the wickedness has been done away, after its temporary and unstable nature is made perfectly clear, then we shall be able to visualize the things which really are eternal. The world as it should always have been will be manifested, and we shall be able to see it and to partake of it, since we shall be free from the shackles which evil so long imposed.

> Now, finally, after all the enemies of the Lamb, and his believers, have been eternally removed, there appears the final and supreme goal of all Apocalyptic prophecy, the eternal completion of the promised mystery of God, that wherein all the promises which the Lord had caused to be declared to his Church are fulfilled, and to which he directed all the hopes of his people in the midst of the afflictions of the world, and toward which, accordingly, also the deepest longing of believers extends. Augustine already remarks correctly: "When the judgment is finished, whereby he announced beforehand that the wicked are to be judged, it remains for him to speak also concerning the good."[1]

1. "The Revelation of St. John", pp. 409 - 411.

2. "The Book of Revelation", pp. 361, 362.

The climax of the ethical message of the Apocalypse is reached in this beautiful passage. All the ugliness has passed away, the sordidness has been removed, evil is vanquished, the whole creation has been cleansed and freed from its maleficent power. It is the view of Kiddle that here

> the old order has entirely vanished; we must emphasize that it is essentially the old order of things, vitiated as it was by every conceivable evil, material and spiritual, which has disappeared....We can understand how John, in company with the later Jewish apocalyptists, and his fellow-Christians of the first century felt about the old earth, drooping under the weight of its crimes, scarred by countless insurrections of the still active powers of Chaos, was a place totally unfit for the final establishment of God's reign. The earth must pass; that is clear.[1]

This is a persuasive paragraph, illuminating a position held by others as well as Kiddle, but it is not so convincing as the view of Milligan:

> The Seer beholds a new heaven and a new earth. Two words in the New Testament are translated "new" but there is a difference between them. The one contemplates the object spoken of under the aspect of something that has recently been brought into existence, the other under a fresh aspect given to what had previously existed, but been outworn. (Trench, Synonyms second series, p. 39). The latter word is employed here, as it is also employed in the phrases a "new garment", that is, a garment not threadbare, like an old one; "new wineskins", that is, skins not shrivelled and dried; "a new tomb", that is, not one recently hewn out of the rock, but one which had never been used as the last resting place of the dead. The fact, therefore, that the heavens and the earth here spoken of are "new", does not imply that they are now first brought into being. They may be the old heavens and the old earth; but they have a new aspect, a new character, adapted to a new end.[2]

The creation, then, is not so much newly created, as purged, righted, fitted to be the habitation of God and Christ, truly designed as the New Jerusalem, the Kingdom of the Lord, toward which the whole creation had been groaning from its earliest days of existence, and now consummated by the intervening action of God in the complete annihilation of the evil of the world. No wonder that the Apocalyptist becomes rhapsodic

over the splendor of that new world as it is typified by the splendor of the new city, no wonder that he apostrophizes her as the very Bride of Christ. So long has the struggle against evil been waged, and so fierce has it been that release from it is positively heavenly. All of the old frustrations and inconsistencies and tensions have been dissolved, and now the world stands ready to receive her God as He has all along intended. His purposes are at last worked out to their full intention not only in the heavenly realm of the prototype but also in the mundane world of human experience.

Not only all that is evil has disappeared, but every thing which acts as a separation and barrier between men has passed away as well. "The sea is no more." The turbulent, estranging and divisive sea, lapping so sullenly at the shores of every continent, holding men off from their natural concourse has no place in the vision of the New Creation. How much of the ill of the world is due to the separateness of men we have no way of estimating, but it must be a considerable share. For we have had many a dramatic illustration of the way in which the suspicions and prejudices of people come tumbling down when once they have gotten really well acquainted with those people who are the objects of their dislike. Nor does this new creation have any place in it for the final and tragic separation which men call death. The new order of things is a world of the spirit, and there is no death with the spirit, which partakes of the eternity of God. All that is fleshly is forever laid aside: mourning, crying, pain. The things of the former creation are over and done with.

This wonderful happening is sealed for the Apocalyptist in a vision of One who sits upon a throne, saying, Behold, I am making all things new. He identifies himself by all the wonderful terms which we have come, throughout the Apocalypse, to recognize as applying to God: the Alpha and the Omega,

the beginning and the end. Furthermore, every one who overcomes shall be the heir of this wonderful spiritual kingdom. Once again stedfastness and faith are the prerequisites to entrance into the kingdom, for very significantly, the first class of those who may not enter is the "fearful." All who fall short of the high standards of Christian life, all those who fall victim to the twin temptations of idolatry and immorality shall take their places with the old creation and all its wickedness in the lake of fire. They have no permanence, because they have no eternal validity. They shall die not only in the flesh, but in the spirit as well, partakers of the second death.

Then, at verse nine, the Apocalyptist breaks out in a rapture over the Holy City. With loving pains he describes her in all her glory: coming down out of heaven from God with the glory of God round about her like a nimbus, the clear sparkle of her like the iridescence of a crystal clear gem, bulwarked round with a high strong wall, which is, however, easily penetrated through the dozen gates let into it, three on a side, which are guarded by angels, and named for the tribes of Israel. It is a city laid out with geometric precision, great and widesweeping as far as the eye can see. Gold and gems are the materials of its buildings, and the gates are lustrous pearls. Even the light of sun and moon have passed away with the "former things", for those who dwell in the presence of God have no need of any light save that radiance which streams from the throne.

Out from the throne of God in the midst of the city flows forth the river of life, bordered with trees of wonderful curative powers. All is delight and joy. No evil thing has any part in this heavenly place, wherein the servants of God shall at last be able to look upon his face, to see him as he is.

It seems almost sacrilegious to dissect this transcendant vision, to lay bare the intent of its symbolism by attaching this and that meaning to the various parts of the vision. And, indeed, it is an unnecessary exercise. For one thing is crystal-clear about this vision: it presents, as in a single lightning flash, a concept of the greatness of God and His goodness and ultimate triumph, to people who needed desperately in their hour of travail, to have something solid to depend upon. To them the Apocalyptist gives security in this deathless insight into the sublimity of what shall be. To restrict the terms of the vision to literal stone and gold, to attempt to describe the trees which line the River-banks, to reduce the whole pulsating and incandescent vision to pedestrian prose is to dismember and violate it sorely.

The people of the Seven Churches, i.e., the whole Christian population, were up against powers and forces of evil which had strength enough to crush and destroy their bodies. We have seen in chapters two and three how those powers made themselves felt. The Apocalyptist has been at pains to show how they can be overcome on earth, because they have already been overcome in heaven. He has given a message of hope to the Christians, bidding them stand like stone against the threats and temptation of evil, idolatrous, and lustful men. It is a trumpet-call, loud and clear, which sounds forth in the Apocalypse. And now, as he comes to the closing words, he sets for them a city in the heavens, an ideal of beauty and truth and strength and goodness. This is no figment of the imagination, no fevered dream, no forlorn hope. It is an insight into what God will do with and for his people. It carries into the future the triumph which Christ began so gloriously upon Calvary.

NOTE: THE FATE OF EVIL AS DESCRIBED IN JEWISH APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE CONTEMPORANEOUS WITH JOHN'S APOCALYPSE: II BARUCH AND IV EZRA

The Apocalypse of John is not the only representative of its genre which remains to us from the period of the first Christian century. The Apocalypse of Baruch, and the Fourth Book of Ezra are works in form of Apocalyptic. These books, coming from the same time as does our Apocalypse, treat of the same problems in general, and deal with them on the basis of the same general philosophy. It seems proper, therefore, to discuss briefly the way in which the problem of evil is developed and resolved in these two works.

Both Baruch and Ezra are highly composite works, and the points of view of their several authors and redactors do not present a highly consistent and developed presentation. However, this need not concern us greatly, since the major contributions which these works make to a discussion of the problem of evil are found to be contained within certain sections of each of them.

The eleventh and twelfth chapters of Fourth Ezra consist of the vision of a great eagle, and the interpretation of the vision. This passage parallels in a remarkable way the vision of the Beast in the thirteenth chapter of the Johannine Apocalypse. The vision of the eagle represents it as having three heads, with many wings, and subordinate heads. The interpretative section tells us that this eagle represents Imperial Rome, in which is concentrated all of the wickedness and godlessness of the world. Rome in its powerful wickedness must be dealt with by an agent strong enough to cope with the Imperial power. This agent is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, i.e., the Messiah, who shall,

1. Fourth Ezra 12:32, 33.

2. Fourth Ezra 11:40 - 45.

> reprove them for their ungodliness, rebuke them for
> their unrighteousness, reproach them to their faces
> for their treacheries. For at the first he shall set
> them alive for judgment: and when he hath rebuked
> them he shall destroy them.[1]

In a passage of power and passion, the doom of evil is prophetically declared:

> Thou hast wielded power over the world with great
> terror, and over all the inhabited earth with griev-
> ous oppression;
> Thou hast dwelt so long in the civilized world with
> fraud, and hast judged the earth (but) not with
> faithfulness:
> For thou hast afflicted the meek,
> And oppressed the peaceable;
> Thou hast hated the upright,
> And loved liars;
> Thou hast destroyed the stronghold of the fruitful,
> and laid low the walls of such as did thee no harm---
> And so thine insolence hath ascended to the Most High,
> and thy pride to the Mighty one.
> Then the Most High regarded his times---
> And lo! they were ended;
> And his ages---
> (and) they were fulfilled.
> Therefore shalt thou disappear, O thou Eagle,
> and thy horrible wings,
> and thy little wings most evil,
> thy harm-dealing heads,
> thy hurtful talons,
> and all thy worthless body![2]

There is an interesting comparison to be made between this description of the doom of Rome, as typified here by the Eagle, and the correlative account of Rome's destruction as recorded in the eighteenth and nineteenth chapters of the Johannine Apocalypse. There the Empire (as symbolized by the City of Rome itself), is represented as a Woman of gross immorality. Here it is described under the figure of a great and rapacious Bird. But the similarity of the two accounts cannot be missed. There is no really essential difference between the conduct of Rome as Woman and Rome as Eagle. And both descriptions clearly foretell the downfall and ruin of the Empire built upon such rottenness of life, such decayed sense of right and wrong.

1. Fourth Ezra 7.

2. Second Baruch 24:1.

With respect to the general movement of events which prepare for the end of evil, Ezra, or at least the Redactor of Ezra, agrees with our Apocalypse.[1] First there is to come the period of the Messianic Woes, followed by the revelation of the Messiah and His immortal companions, i.e., some of the spiritual heroes of the earlier times. Messiah destroys the assembled enemies of divine rule, and institutes the Messianic kingdom, of 400 years duration. At the end of that period, the Messiah and all earthly beings die, and all of creation is silent for seven days. Then follows the Resurrection and the final judgment. The pattern of events is clearly related to that of John's Apocalypse, but there are several differences as well. In our Apocalypse the Messiah is not accompanied by immortal companions, although there may be some relationship here with the Two Witnesses who are introduced in the eleventh chapter of John's work. Moreover, in the Johannine Apocalypse, the Messianic kingdom is of a thousand years' duration, and the Messiah is not marked for death at its close. But the detailed differences merely serve to underline the basic similarity of the two accounts.

The Apocalypse of Baruch likewise has clear relationship with our Apocalypse, in its philosophy of evil. According to Baruch, the whole of the present world belongs to the sphere of corruption, and must be destroyed. Even the Messianic kingdom is part of the corruptible world, although it is likewise the beginning of the golden age of incorruption. At the close of the Messianic age, the Messiah returns to heaven, the righteous rise to a blessed life of reward, the unrighteous are cast into the torment of fire.

The judgment on the unrighteous men is strictly in accord with conduct, as these words make plain: "the days come and the books shall be opened in which are written all the sins of those who have sinned,"[2] and "know ye not

1. Second Baruch 82:2.

2. Second Baruch 29:4.

3. Second Baruch 29:5.

that our Maker will assuredly avenge us on all our enemies according to all that they have done to us."[1]

Again, in this Apocalypse, the sequence of events follows the typical pattern of Apocalypses. The kingdom of the Messiah is ushered in by the awful convulsions known as the Messianic Woes. In Baruch there are twelve of them, all described graphically in chapter 27. After them, Messiah comes. And again, in chapters 70 - 74 the whole scene is described: the confusion into which the world is thrown at the end of the age, due to the calamities and uncertainties of the time; the dealing of Messiah with the "nations", some of which he shall spare, while others he shall slay; and then the glories of the Messianic age. There is an interesting intimation of relationship to the "beast" of John's Apocalypse in Baruch's comment that "Behemoth shall be revealed from his place and Leviathan shall ascend from the sea,"[2] and that these two primeval monsters shall be "as Food".[3] Here is evil, marked out for ultimate destruction, as is the Apocalyptic model of the period, whether it be canonical or uncanonical. For evil was to be dealt with in some sinister forms in the latter days of the first century. Men had to be very sure that it could not last. In these apocalyptic discussions of the problem, the transient character of evil is made clear, as well as its ultimate punishment. Baruch and Ezra but reiterate what John has been saying. Theirs is a consistent witness to the triumph of good in the world which God has made.

1. Galatians 6:7.

2. Revelation 22:12.

3. Revelation 20:12.

II

THE NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF "WORKS"

In addition to the passages which have already been discussed, the Apocalypse contains certain passages which have an ethical bearing, but which are sporadic in the book and have less relation to the subject matter of this inquiry than have the materials already considered. It seemed proper and logical to give attention to these passages, though not in detailed form.

On the whole, it is true to say that these sections are related to the general conception of works and their consequence which is held by the Apocalyptist. This is a fairly well-defined conception, and is set forth in terms which are familiar echoes of other New Testament writers. The general law of the harvest, "that whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap"[1], finds expression in this Apocalypse, though in somewhat different terms. According to the Seer, Christ is quickly coming upon the earth, bringing reward with Him for every man, "according as his work is."[2] The judgment is not to be made upon any capricious basis, but upon the sober record of a man's life, which record is represented as having been kept in heaven. Thus in the judgment scene "the dead were judged out of the things that were written in the books, according to their works."[3] This time of judgment when books shall be opened is definitely conceived in eschatological terms, and is part of the complex of events which comprise the last days of the present creation, before the end of all things.

But there is another type of judgment according to works which the book presents which has nothing to do with eschatology; it is, however, strictly in terms of consequences, more or less immediate, and is cer-

1. Revelation 2:23.

2. Revelation 17:18.

tainly part of the temporal order. An apt illustration of this second kind of judgment is contained in the Thyatiran letter in connection with the "woman Jezebel" and her followers. The natural consequences of the sins of the people with the woman are set forth, and climaxed with the statement, "I will give unto each one of you according to your works."[1]

But whether the judgment be eschatological or of the present world-order, the Apocalyptist makes strong insistence upon the necessity of works which are good, and not evil, as well as upon a vital connection between the works of men and the fate of men. Certain passages of the Apocalypse which may seem at first glance to suggest predestination need to be considered in the light of this general insistence upon the importance of works. These passages are those which speak of those whose names have "not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world,"[2] or in similar terms describe the wicked and sinning people outside the grace of God. It is true that such words cast a doubt upon the effective free will of men. But the words apparently are to be interpreted to convey no more than the strong sense which the Apocalyptist had of the omniscence of God from the beginning of the world, coupled with his overwhelming sense of the sovereignty of God and of the certainty of His ultimate triumph. Since, in many passages, the author writes as if it made a monumental difference how men lived, since he calls upon them again and again to repent, to turn again, to do otherwise than they were currently doing, it seems that the weight of probability is against a predestination of any thorough-going sort. It seems further that the main line of the Apocalyptist's thought is toward affirming the basic freedom of man's will, and the power of choice which is both the glory and the peril of life.

1. Stevens, George Barker, "The Theology of the New Testament", p. 546.

What is the nature of these works which the Christians are exhorted to produce, which are the basis of the judgment which shall one day be rendered against men? Stevens summarizes the matter quite satisfactorily:

> What is the nature of these "works"? They cannot be observance of the Mosaic law, since the book nowhere recognizes its obligation. They are rather to be regarded as deeds of fidelity and devotion to Christ, such as the endurance of affliction for his sake and the preservation of purity under the stress of temptation. To "keep Christ's works" is to "overcome" (2:26), that is, to triumph in the moral conflict of life; it is to be steadfast amidst sufferings, even to the point of forfeiting life itself (12:11). In 2:19 the "works" of the saints are explained by the words love, faith, ministry, and patience, and in 3:4 the heavenly reward is given to those who have lived an undefiled life. The "righteous acts" (δικαιώματα) of the saints" (19:8), in which they clothe themselves as with a robe, consist in "keeping the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (14:12). Thus we see that the works which are so richly rewarded are regarded as having their source and spring in fidelity to Christ. They are the "works of Jesus" (2:26). No obligation beyond obedience to the requirements of his gospel is laid upon the Christian (2:24). To keep the commands of God is synonymous with holding the testimony of Jesus (12:17). Hence the song of the redeemed is at once the song of Moses and of the Lamb (15:3), and the "testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (19:10). The truth of Jesus is the touchstone by which to measure the value and determine the import of law and prophecy.[1]

All of this is to say that as the Apocalyptist uses the term "works", it is made to stand for the expression of the moral character of man as a whole, for the deepest intents and purposes of life, for the nature of man as it is in principle. "Works" are to be understood as overt acts only in the sense that moral character produces within life deeds of a certain quality and character. It is inevitable that what is implicit in character will become explicit in deed. The principles of a man's life are translated regularly into deeds which are consonant with that character. If the basic assumptions and faiths of life be evil, evil deeds will be the result. If the foundation of life be good, good deeds will be the product.

1. "The Revelation of St. John", Volume I, p. 372.

2. Revelation 2:2.

3. Revelation 2:19.

4. Revelation 3:2.

5. Revelation 3:15.

In a notable passage, Charles[1] demonstrates how outward acts are regarded by the Apocalyptist as the manifestation of the inner life. The following discussion owes much to his interpretation. Charles employs four passages to prove his case: "I know thy works, and thy toil and patience (steadfastness, RV marg.)"[2]; "I know thy works, and thy love and faith and ministry and patience;"[3] "I have found no works of thine perfected before my God;"[4] "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot."[5]

In the first of these passages the absence of the pronoun σου after "thy toil", in Charles' opinion binds together the phrase "thy toil and thy patience." He goes on to comment that the first "and" (καί) is employed in an epexegetical sense, i.e., as elucidation rather than as connection, so that the sense of the passage is that works are defined as toil and patience, as labor and stedfastness.

The second passage illustrates the principle even more clearly. Here there is a series of four qualities: love, faith, ministry, patience, which are taken closely together, and again are preceded by a connective used in the epexegetical sense. So, the four qualities form the definition of works in this instance.

The evidence in the third passage is negative rather than positive. It is there stated that no works of the church in Sardis are found perfect, i.e., they fall short of the divine standard, but there is no mention of the ways in which the shortcomings have been manifest. It might be expected that such mention of shortcomings would be accompanied by some specific indication of the form in which it was apparent. Indeed, there are passages in the Apocalypse where that is true. For example, in the letter to the Ephesians there occurs the statement that there is against the church the fact that it had left its first love. The absence of any direct charge

in this third passage may suggest that these works were not of an outward character, but inward, having to do with the character of the people.

The fourth instance, the celebrated denunciation of the Laodiceans for being neither hot nor cold, but so insipid and lukewarm a people as to be sickening, does not contain any definite statement of the ways in which their works fall short. To other churches charges are made concerning some definite way in which their conduct needed to be improved. But here, when what is at issue is the general nature of "works" themselves, no such specific statement is made at all. The implication seems to be plain, i.e., that works, for the Apocalyptist, are the manifestation of the inner life and character.

Thus, the term "works" is seen to have an ethical significance of great import in the Apocalypse, but not in relation to outward deeds, or isolated obediences. Rather, the significance is to be seen as consisting in the inner qualities of life. If these qualities are good, they will issue in acts of goodness. If they are evil, evil will be the nature of the life. Overt acts of human conduct are but the manifestation of the inner nature of the person.

In the light of all this, it is clear that judgment which is made upon the basis of works is very realistic and quite in line with basic Christian understanding of the nature of God. There is no sentimental detachment of the deed from the intent, no assumption that there is anything in the least arbitrary about the way in which judgment is meted out. To understand this is to get a better perspective for viewing some of the passages in the Apocalypse which otherwise seem to be somewhat bloodthirsty and vengeful. Take for example the statement of Revelation 21:8:

> But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolators, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.

Why is this so? Because there is a vengeful spirit on the part of God? Because He delights in punishment? Because in some way the names of these persons had not been found written in the Lamb's book of life? Not at all. The condemnation of these classes to the lake of fire is the logical outcome and end of a type of character such as they exhibited. They were recognized to be evil by nature because of the wickedness of their deeds. Known by their fruits, they were condemned for the roots of evil which were within.

The Apocalyptist left his readers in no doubt at all as to what he considered to be the crowning evil of the life of his day. Nor did he leave them in any doubt as to what was the crucial test of their loyalty to Jesus and His kingdom. The demand that the Emperor be worshipped as God was the one overarching evil, and Christians would be judged on the basis of their response to the demand. How Christians met other situations was of little consequence compared with their stand before the imperious and presumptuous demand of Rome for divine honors to be heaped upon the Emperor. If this seems to us to be quite patently an unfair way to judge the Christians of the late first century, we should remind ourselves that in every age there is some absolutely crucial problem or other, which, if Christians fail to meet it squarely and unequivocably, vitiates their other endeavors, and weakens their testimony disastrously. The problem of the age is, for every generation, the standard against which the efficacy of the Christian witness will be measured.

1. Revelation 14: 9 - 11.

2. Revelation 14: 12, 13.

Thus, in the demand of the Beast to be worshipped, as we have it in the verses which follow, was to be found the one problem for Christians, in the light of which every other was dwarfed. If Christians did not stand firm against that evil, they could never make an unclouded witness to the power of Jesus in their lives in any other relationship. No wonder the words are so severe:

> And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a great voice, If any man worshippeth the beast and his image, and receiveth a mark on his forehead or upon his hand, he also shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is prepared unmixed in the cup of his anger; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: and the smoke of their torment goeth up for ever and ever; and they have no rest day and night, they that worship the beast and his image, and whoso receiveth the mark of his name.[1]

As the passage discloses, it was not only the Christians' witness which was at stake in the struggle with the Imperial cult. The future status of the disciples was at stake as well. Those who were worshippers of the Beast became the possession of the Beast. They were identified with him. As his destiny, so theirs. As his punishment, so theirs. In the time of the great judgment, there should be no rest day or night for those who accepted as valid the great apostasy: the worship of a mortal as God.

But the Apocalyptist goes on to say,[2] whoever stands fast against the challenge, whoever holds the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus, shall be rewarded. Though he should perish in persecution for bearing a Christian testimony, there is blessedness in store for him. When a man leaves this earth to enter into his rest, his works follow him. Christian character and life, all the little "deeds of weekday holiness," these things are not lost. Character is determinative. There is a law of the conservation of spiritual energy, as well as of physical energy. The man who can meet the fundamental test which life puts to him, and answer it

1. Revelation 6:9 - 11.

2. Luke 18:7.

so as to honor his Lord, need have no fear of the future, in this world or the next. This is a basic conclusion of the Apocalyptist.

For the one who faces evil in its worst forms, there is a vital and searching problem posed. What is to be the attitude of the sufferer toward his oppressor? The Apocalypse puts the question boldly in the following passage:

> And when he opened the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of them that had been slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: and they cried with a great voice, saying, How long, O Master, the holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And there was given them to each one a white robe; and it was said unto them that they should rest yet for a little time, until their fellow-servants also, and their brethren, who should be killed even as they were, should have fulfilled their course.[1]

If this be a world of moral quality, it makes a difference how men live. If there is to be some effective and rational justice, based upon the nature of men's acts, then this "pathetic, impatient thirst for blood-revenge" can be readily understood. Assuredly it does not attain in spirit to the lofty level of the spirit of Christ, ignoring personal wrongs, and suffering whatever evil comes upon us. It is, of course, a far cry from the Master's murmur of forgiveness upon the Cross. But it is not possible to dismiss this plaint of the souls of the martyrs by assuming that it breathes only the spirit of the more militant Judaism, and falls short of everything Christian.

We may quote Jesus Himself on behalf of those who suffer unjustly, and who seek a divine validation of their suffering:

> And shall not God avenge his elect, which cry out to him day and night, and he is long-suffering over them? I say unto you that he will avenge them speedily.[2]

It was a common apocalyptic idea that the day of judgment could be

1. Revelation 8:3, 4.

2. Enoch 47.

3. "The Revelation of St. John the Divine", Expositor's Greek Testament, Volume V, p. 391.

hastened by the prayers of the saints,[1] and the cries of the martyrs.[2] So here the emphasis is upon the coming judgment of God upon the world, a judgment which shall be in accordance with the deeds of men. That is specific and foremost in the mind of the Apocalyptist. The personal satisfaction which the departed martyrs might receive at the downfall and punishment of their persecutors is not in the foreground. Of course, we should be mistakenly naive to assume that there is no element of anticipated vengeance in the cry of the martyrs. We are presented with a mixed situation, and the passage must be viewed in the light of both perspectives. It is difficult for us to understand clearly how much of the cry is born out of a desire for vengeance, and how much is an outraged sense that while evil flourishes, all is not well with the world. We shall not go astray, however, in accepting the dictum of Moffat, that here the "bleeding heart of Christendom stands up and cries, 'I have suffered'."[3]

In any event, even though the martyrs themselves might have been silent, their blood shed upon the sands of the arenas throughout the empire, and upon the floors of many a prison would then have cried eloquently to be covered. For this is a world in which there is a difference between right and wrong. Unpunished evil stands as a monstrous blot upon the life of the world. In this passage, suffering righteousness passionately appeals for the vindication of the cause in which it gave its life. If that cause be a true one, it will be vindicated, and its vindication will, in part, take the shape of punishment meted out to those who fought against it, and who persecuted its proponents.

In the light of the certain doom and punishment of evil and the surety of the victory of God, the "saints" ought to wait with patience and faith for the reward of that good conduct which is the expression of a truly Christian nature. The principle is set forth by the Apocalyptist, thus:

1. Revelation 13:10.

2. Revelation 13:7a.

> If any man is for captivity, into captivity he goeth: if any man kill with the sword, with the sword must he be killed. Here is the patience and faith of the saints.[1]

When manifest injustice and wrong reign in the temporal world, it is indeed difficult to maintain with poise and equanimity the belief that the hand of God does rule decisively in the affairs of the world. The power of evil in the world is terrifyingly demonstrated in the thirteenth chapter of the Apocalypse. There is set forth the vision of the Beast out of the sea, to whom it was "given to make war with the saints, and to overcome them".[2] Wickedness seems rampant for the moment, and good appears to lie prostrate and impotent upon the ground.

But the Apocalyptist recognizes this to be a transient victory for the powers of evil. Soon their unholy triumph will turn to dust and ashes. It is difficult, however, for the faithful Christians, caught in the midst of the struggle with evil, to recognize that their foe will shortly be overcome. Some encouragement must be given to the Christians, that they may continue stedfast and faithful. The passage quotedabove provides that encouragement.

Some commentators have seen in this verse simply a more or less fatalistic comment about the world. Others see in it evidences of predestination. But the concluding phrase is the revealing one: here is the patience and faith of the saints. There is nothing about predestination to make anyone patient. Nor does fatalism promote faith. We must look more closely to see what is here.

To paraphrase it, the message runs something like this: If it be your lot to be a captive, take it patiently. If that shall be your destiny from God for a little while, accept it. Anybody who resists with the sword will perish by the same sword. Use force and you will suffer for it.

As Christians you have no temporal weapons to use against the aggression of the world. Most certainly you may not use any such weapons. But stand fast, endure, bear what you must. It is true that you cannot take up the sword without suffering for it. But it is likewise true that those who lift the sword against you will,in their turn, be done to death by that same bloody instrument of conquest. This is the nature of the world. Be patient and wait. Do not attempt to force the issue. Hearken to these words, for they are true.

Thus, the challenge which the Apocalyptist puts before the people to whom he writes is primarily a challenge to the development of spiritual resources to meet the powers of evil without faltering. So unshakable is his faith in the ultimate triumph of God that he can counsel the most thoroughgoing and radical self-discipline through the trials and shocks of the present. For at the time of God's triumph, the moral scales will come into balance, and the inner natures of men will receive the reward which they have earned, good for good, evil for evil. But reward is in God's hand. The function of the believer is patient stedfastness.

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